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NFL DRAFT ISSUE

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WINSTON**

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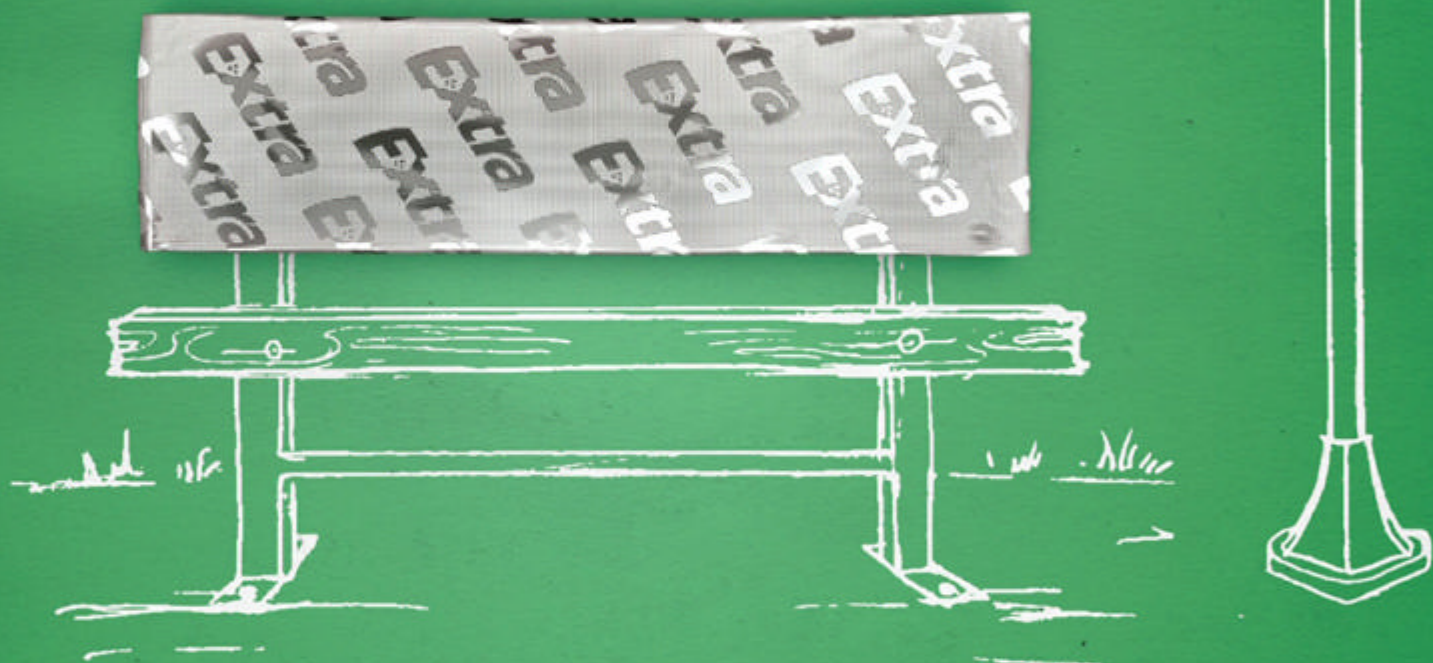
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NFL DRAFT 2015

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Mudiay was a prep All-American before heading to play in China.

CHAD FORD'S PICKS

NBA DRAFT'S TOP 4 IMPORTS

EMMANUEL MUDIAY

CHINA The 6-5 point guard, 19, who moved from the Democratic Republic of Congo to the U.S. in 2001, is seen as an international player even though he went to Prime Prep in Dallas. Eligibility doubts after he committed to SMU led him to go pro in Guangdong, China. He didn't up his stock much, but scouts like his work ethic and maturity, pegging him a long shot for No. 1.

KRISTAPS PORZINGIS

LATVIA The power forward has the size [6-11, 220] and athleticism to stretch the floor and protect the rim. Several international GMs and scouts say the 19-year-old could be the second coming of Dirk Nowitzki. More cautious personnel think he projects as a more athletic version of the Bulls' Nikola Mirotic. Either way, he should be a top-five pick.

MARIO HEZONJA

CROATIA Hezonja has cooled off since losing his starting job at FC Barcelona in late February. But at this point, the 6-7 small forward has done enough to put himself in serious play to go as high as the No. 6 pick. At 20 years old, he has a combination of athleticism, shooting ability and energy that makes him the most well-rounded of the wings in this draft class.

ZHOU QI

CHINA Zhou is quietly putting up dominant numbers in China for a 19-year-old, and scouts loved him at the Nike Hoop Summit a year ago. He's another versatile big man [7-1, 215] who can shoot and protect the rim. A major knock on the power forward is his slight frame, but his high ceiling makes him worthy of a flier selection late in the first round.

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THIS MONTH AT INSIDER

NFL DRAFT The NFL Front Office team ponders the draft decisions for all the teams picking in the top five.

NBA Bradford Doolittle and Amin Elhassan have detailed scouting reports for every playoff matchup.

MLB Buster Olney, Keith Law and Jim Bowden weigh in on the early MLB surprises—both good and bad.

NHL Craig Custance provides analysis as the puck drops on the 2015 Stanley Cup playoffs.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL Travis Haney looks at CFB's best young coaches, including Oregon's 41-year-old Mark Helfrich.

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How fierce was Teddy Bridgewater heading into last year's NFL draft? Not even a bear could faze the QB. espnmag.com/covers

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[HIDDEN FROM JUSTICE] *A haunting new documentary shows that the bungled investigation of the Jameis Winston sexual assault case is far from a football-fueled outlier.*

[J] ameis Winston is going to be drafted by an NFL team on April 30, probably with the No. 1 pick. But instead of sharing a bear hug with NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, the quarterback likely will stay home. He says it's because he wants to be around his family. And Goodell won't force him to appear; he undoubtedly understands that the optics of welcoming Winston—who was accused of but not charged with raping a Florida State classmate—are complicated at best.

As this issue's cover story on Winston details, he and Erica Kinsman tell different stories about what happened on Dec. 7, 2012. Kinsman says Winston raped her; Winston says they had consensual sex. But while #FSUTwitter and survivors' advocates may forever argue the facts, what's indisputable is the shocking ineptitude of colleges when it comes to handling sexual assault, especially when it involves a star athlete.

That's the ultimate takeaway after watching the powerful new documentary *The Hunting Ground*, in which Kinsman drops her anonymity and talks at length about her version of events—a version that has remained the same for more than two years. What's so haunting is that time frame: years. The film details how she reported the alleged assault immediately to law enforcement and was even driven to the hospital by FSU police. Then virtually no investigation took place.

There's a jarring moment in the film when these words flash on screen: "With the information Erica provided, the Tallahassee Police Department could have ... identified and questioned the suspect and his two roommates the next day ... obtained video from the 30 surveillance cameras at the bar where she met the suspect ... located the cab driver who drove Erica and the suspect from the bar. They did none of these."

The real power of *The Hunting Ground* is in the sheer number of women (and a few men) who come forward to tell their stories. Collectively, the accounts they offer show just how broken university sexual assault investigation procedures truly are. In Kinsman's case, Fox Sports has reported that the FSU campus police chief obtained the original police report four days

before prosecutors, then handed it out to FSU officials and Winston's lawyer. Before law enforcement officials spoke with two key witnesses, the witnesses had already met with Winston's attorney. Their accounts would line up remarkably with that of Winston's lawyer. After declining to charge Winston, Florida State Attorney Willie Meggs said the local police's delay did "hamper" his office's investigation. In the film, Meggs is asked if he believes Winston raped Kinsman. "I think I did not have sufficient evidence to prove that he sexually assaulted her against her will," Meggs says. "I think things that happened there that night were not good."

Florida State isn't commenting on the Winston case because it is facing a federal lawsuit from Kinsman. But university president John Thrasher has said that *The Hunting Ground* filmmakers didn't give the school adequate time to respond to Kinsman's allegations and that FSU's comprehensive sexual assault policies weren't represented.

It'd be easy to dismiss the Winston case as an outlier. But in fact, *The Hunting Ground* is just the latest window into a far-too-common problem. The documentary cites studies showing that college athletes make up less than 4 percent of male college students but 19 percent of sexual assaults. Missouri Sen. Claire McCaskill's damning report last summer found that more than 20 percent of college athletic departments are allowed to oversee sexual assault cases involving their own athletes.

By protecting Winston, Florida State and the police not only prevented Kinsman from getting justice but Winston as well. The way the legal and university processes played out, he was never able to fully clear his name.

Meanwhile, the former classmates' lives have played out very differently, illustrating why nearly 70 percent of sexual assaults are never reported. One has been shunned by her community, while the other will emerge from a tunnel to cheers on Sundays this fall. The images are lasting: A smiling Winston holds the Heisman Trophy, a resigned Kinsman tells her side of the story once again and campus administrators across the country still don't understand what they did wrong.

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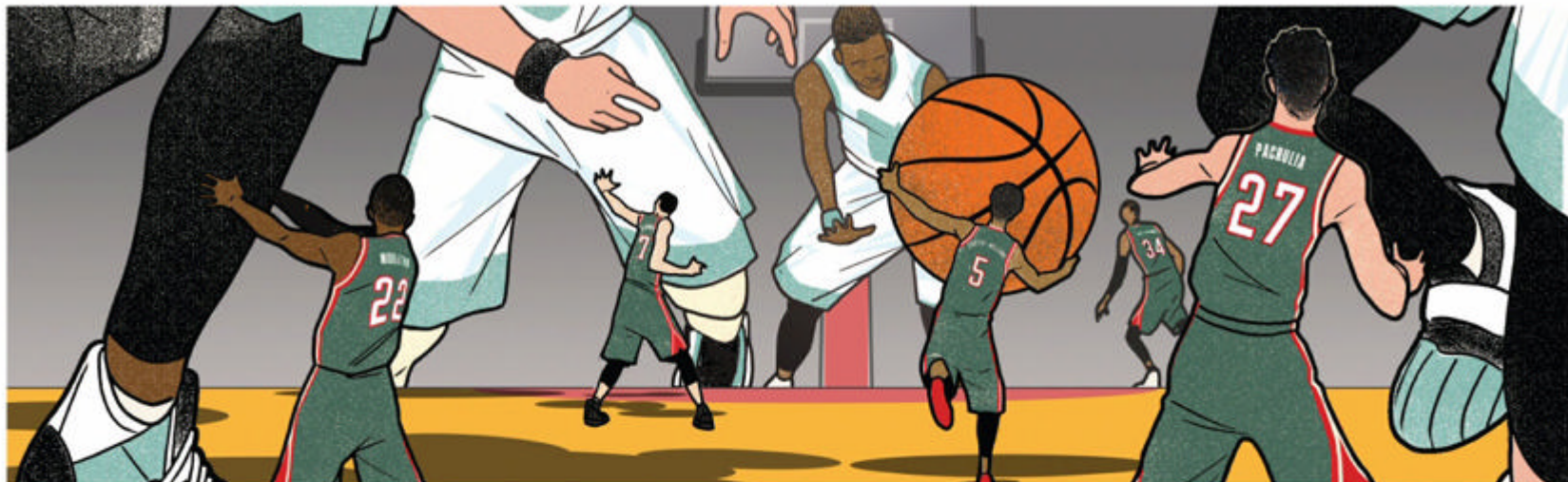
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[THE BUCKS START HERE] *Are you ready for April Anarchy in the NBA? We've identified the signs of an NBA playoff upset, and no Cinderella looks more dangerous than Milwaukee.*

[E] SPN's **Giant Killers** project has been using analytics to hunt for Cinderellas during March Madness since 2006. And let me tell you, that task is nowhere near as difficult as trying to forecast upsets in the NBA playoffs. In the pros, lower seeds have won just 22 of 96 first-round matchups, and only three No. 1 seeds have lost since the league went to a best-of-seven format in 2003. Still, it's not totally impossible to find someone to fit the glass sneaker at the NBA ball.

As a general principle, Cinderellas don't succeed by suddenly improving their overall play. Rather, they often go high risk/high reward, widening the variability of their scoring. It's true that in the pros, the talent gaps between first-round opponents are much narrower and the giant-killing characteristics are subtler than in college. We can't simply say, for example, that long-range shooting makes for dangerous underdogs because NBA teams that don't take 3s usually don't make the postseason in the first place. That said, Insider's Kevin Pelton applied Giant Killers concepts to the NBA playoffs last year and correctly predicted, "If you're looking for a likely upset, Wizards-Bulls is a good place to start." Building on his research, we can now isolate factors that could lead to ... April Anarchy.

First, underdogs that focus on defense are more likely to succeed as Giant Killers, particularly if they generate a lot of turnovers. In 2012, for example, the 76ers gave up just 99.2 points per 100 possessions, the third-best rate in the NBA, and as an 8-seed they beat the No. 1 Bulls in a series in which Derrick Rose tore his ACL and Philadelphia won the turnover battle 82-55. The 2011 Grizzlies finished ninth in defensive efficiency and first in defensive turnover percentage, and they upended top-seeded San Antonio. Various studies have shown that regular-season defense predicts playoff success better than offense. That seems to be partly because low-seeded, hardworking teams maintain their defensive intensity and can turn into Giant Killers, even when they don't shoot well. The Spurs are an obvious possibility this season: They were in the sixth hole in the Western Conference through April 8, but they'd limited opponents to

101.8 points per 100 possessions, the second-best efficiency in the NBA.

Another attribute of an NBA Giant Killer? Sending overdogs to the line. Pelton found that lower seeds that fouled opponents more often than league average won nearly 30 percent of their first-round series, nearly twice the rate of underdogs that don't foul often. This might seem strange, but at Giant Killers we have also found that college teams that rely heavily on free throws for scoring tend to underperform in the postseason. So whether you build up a foul shot advantage or disadvantage in the regular season, you should not expect it to carry into the playoffs, when refs monitor games more tightly. This is good news for the Clippers, who had allowed opponents to take a whopping 2,039 free throws through 79 games, tops among playoff-bound teams.

Finally, one simple metric, not useful in college, predicts NBA upsets with stunning accuracy: head-to-head record. Over the past 12 years, when lower seeds won their regular-season series against opponents they faced in the playoffs, the lower seeds won 11 of 20 first-round sequels. In contrast, underdogs that split their season series were 7-15 and those that lost were 5-49. So if the Hornets slip into the playoffs, they could be surprisingly tough against Atlanta: Entering the final weekend of the season, the Hawks were 1-2 against Charlotte while posting a 13-1 record against the four other teams battling for the final two seeds in the East.

This season there's no perfect underdog carrying every giant-killing trait, but keep an eye on the Bucks. Through April 8, they ranked fourth in the NBA in defensive efficiency (allowing 102.8 points per 100 possessions) and third in hacking opponents. And they were the NBA's best at forcing turnovers. Jason Kidd has put together a smart, young, long-armed squad that constantly double-teams and switches. This aggressiveness pressures opponents into making bad passes and taking bad shots, creating extra possessions for the Bucks. In fact, they look more like a college-style Giant Killer than just about any other NBA team.

Cleveland and especially Toronto: Consider yourself warned.



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ZOOM

WHO

Hairstylist Jose "Jordan" Lopez, who buzzes Robinson Cano [while Felix Hernandez and Nelson Cruz watch] and gives a shave, cut and facial to Albert Pujols

WHEN

March 27,
8:19 a.m. [right]
and 3:31 p.m. MT

WHERE

Peoria Sports
Complex, Peoria,
Arizona; and
Tempe Diablo
Stadium, Tempe,
Arizona



For many major leaguers, there's only one guy who can get away with brushing them back: Jose "Jordan" Lopez. The owner of two barbershops in New York City, Lopez started building a big baseball clientele after he met Luis Castillo in 2001 at spring training; Castillo then told his friend Edgar Renteria ... and so on and so on. Lopez's roster now includes regulars like Hernandez, Jose Reyes, Aroldis Chapman and Carlos Gomez and walk-ins, like Mike Trout, who stop by when Lopez is in town. King Felix met Lopez in 2005, and the two have been close ever since; Hernandez even takes him on the road. "I like how he cuts my hair, so I'll fly him in every time. I have to look good," says Hernandez. Lopez also provides facials and shaves in a 45-minute process that includes laughter, stories and the occasional prank. [One night, Lopez returned to his room to find his clothes in shreds. Oh, that Felix!] He doesn't have a set charge; he lets players name the price. "They don't treat me like a barber," Lopez says. "Everybody is family. I'm so grateful for all of them." —ANNA KATHERINE CLEMMONS

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PLAYBOOK

Duncan Keith and the Hawks will rain snowy hell on the NHL playoffs.



NHL

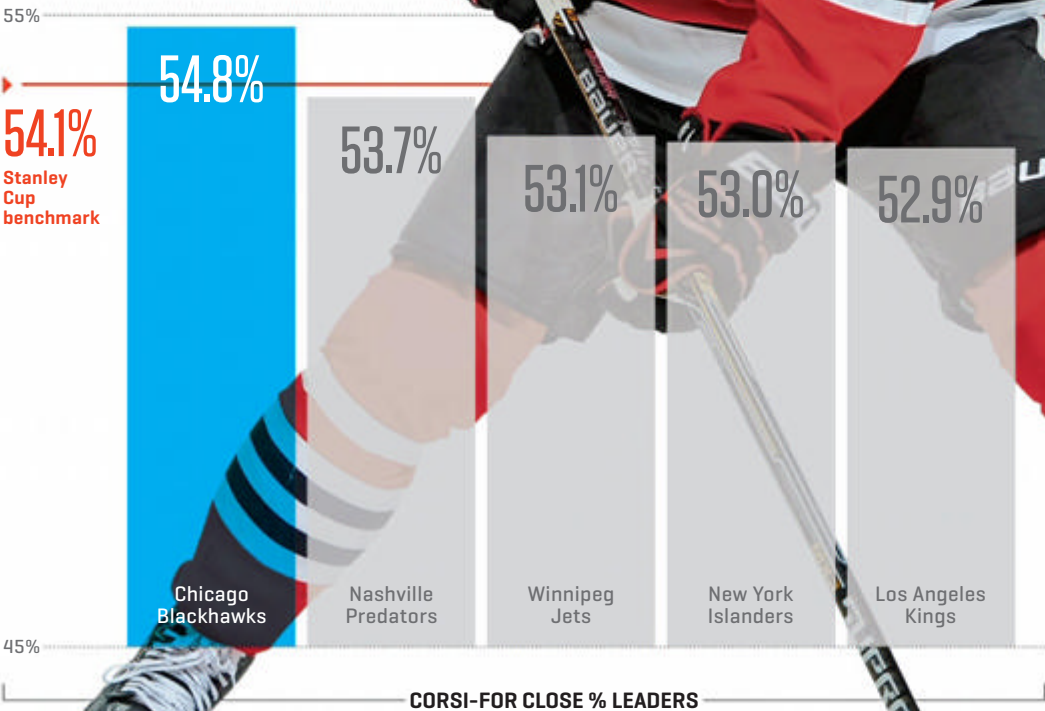
BLACKHAWKS, UP

NEVER MIND THAT NORRIS WINNER DUNCAN KEITH AND CHICAGO DIDN'T EVEN WIN THE WEST. OUR POSTSEASON MODEL SAYS THEY'LL CLAIM THEIR THIRD CUP IN SIX YEARS. *By Ben Arledge*

Hockey fans brag that their playoffs are the best in sports. They're fluid! Exciting! Unpredictable! Hard to disagree—except now, thanks to our new Stanley Cup forecasting model, they just got a little more predictable. We began by studying recent Cup winners for common denominators, finding four consistent traits: elite puck control, top-tier goaltending, deep playoff experience and the ability to neutralize power plays. Then we calculated the average, per trait, for each champ since the 2004-05 lockout. Surprisingly enough, the only team to surpass each benchmark this year? The Blackhawks. Don't argue with us. It's math!

1 FOR PUCK'S SAKE

When the score is close—tied or a one-goal game—and a lucky bounce can change the outcome of a season, puck possession is key. With four players in the top 35 in Corsi-for close percentage* [Andrew Shaw, Patrick Sharp, Patrick Kane, **Jonathan Toews**], Chicago exhausts its foes with sharp, quick passes in the offensive zone and outshoots them—to the tune of 700 more shots than its opponents. The Blackhawks are tops in the NHL by far in possession rating and the only team to eclipse the Cup benchmark this season.



2 MINDING THE NET

News flash: Keeping the other team from scoring is kind of a big deal. "If you don't have goaltending and you have everything else, there's something wrong," says Blackhawks coach Joel Quenneville. In Chicago's Cup run in 2013, Corey Crawford posted a stellar 93.80 percent five-on-five adjusted save percentage, which adjusts for even-strength situations and shot difficulty. This season he's posting a 93.79 rate, the NHL's sixth-best among starting goalies (minimum 20 games). All of which has helped Chicago hold opponents to fewer than three goals in 48 games—the most in the NHL.

5-ON-5 ADJ. SAVE % LEADERS		
SAVE PERCENTAGE		NHL RANK
94.75	Carey Price, MTL	2
94.09	Devan Dubnyk, MIN	3
93.97	Andrew Hammond, OTT	5
93.79	Corey Crawford, CHI	6
93.66	Ondrej Pavelec, WPG	7
93.62	Marc-Andre Fleury, PIT	9
93.56	Pekka Rinne, NSH	10
93.52	Tuukka Rask, BOS	11
93.28	Jonathan Quick, LA	13
93.22	Stanley Cup benchmark	
93.20	Braden Holtby, WSH	14
93.14	Jaroslav Halak, NYI	15
93.14	Jonas Hiller, CGY	15

*Puck possession rate when the score is within a goal in the first two periods or tied in the third/OT. All stats through April 7 for playoff-eligible teams, courtesy of war-on-ice.com.

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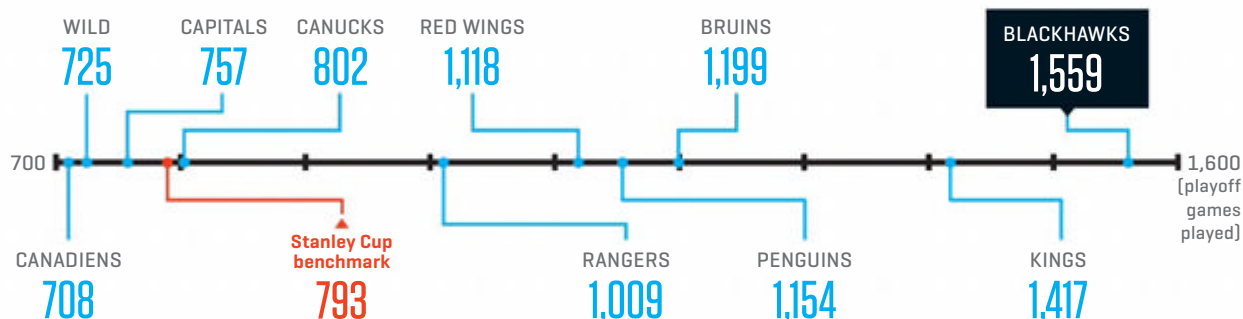


From left, the hockey firm of Kane, Hossa and Keith.

3 HAVE BEARD, WILL PLAY

Talk all you want about fresh legs and team speed—in the playoffs, experience matters. Consider: The typical Cup winner has 793 games of playoff experience on its roster. Chicago has 1,559. Hawks winger Marian Hossa, who with 171 career postseason games trails only Jaromir Jagr among active players, joins nine other Hawks with at least 80 such games. Quenneville even leads active coaches in playoff games behind the bench [181]. As one Western Conference GM says, “Teams like the Blackhawks, who have been there before, should be favored.”

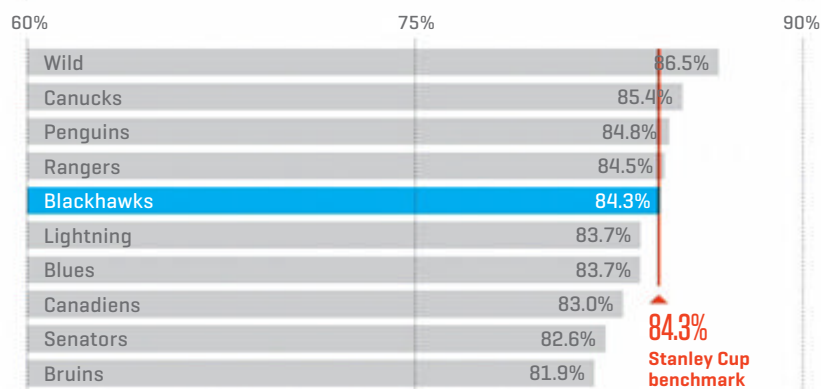
TOP CAREER PLAYOFF APPEARANCES, BY ROSTER



4 KILLER ON THE PENALTY

Blackhawks forward Marcus Kruger, 24, anchors Chicago’s penalty kill, which stops opponents’ power plays an elite 84.3 percent of the time [seventh in the NHL]. “Krug is great on draws,” says Hawks center Andrew Shaw, “and great on taking away lanes to the net.” Both are key to neutralizing one-man advantages and should come in handy in the postseason: Of the past eight Stanley Cup champs, six had penalty-kill units in the top eight in the league. Our bet? Come June, Chicago will make that seven of the past nine.

PENALTY-KILL PERCENTAGE LEADERS



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PRESENTS

COLD HARD FACTS

The NHL playoffs are like a hockey roshambo—each team’s weaknesses are harshly exploited by the elevated play. Here’s what could bring down a few of 2015’s top Stanley Cup contenders. —BEN ARLEDGE

49.6

The **Canadiens’** Corsi-for close percentage, 21st in the NHL. To win, they’ll need unsustainably dominant goaltending from Carey Price.

92.92

Lightning goalie Ben Bishop’s five-on-five adjusted save percentage, far below the rate of the typical Cup champ [93.22 percent].

414

Postseason appearances by members of the **Blues**, fourth fewest among playoff-eligible teams.

81.0

Penalty-kill percentage of the Western Conference-leading **Ducks**, good for a mediocre 18th in the league.

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YES, THEY CAV! (MAYBE)

An 82-game schedule *should* yield answers to most any NBA question. That is, unless you're asking about the Cavs of 2015. As one NBA exec defines them: "Erratic production from Kevin Love; David Blatt has no playoff experience; they lack low-post scoring—but they still easily win the East." What he's getting at, of course, is that there are reasons to be both wildly optimistic and deeply dubious about the Cavs' title hopes. Let's enumerate the ways! —JORDAN BRENNER

WHY THEY WON'T WIN...

THEY'RE NOT EXACTLY BEST FRIENDS

There's no doubt the Cavs are long on talent, but they're woefully short on male bonding. Says one East exec, "Their lack of continuity affects their ball movement and defense." But the issue runs deeper than inconsistent help D or the challenges of integrating Love into the offense. Champions tend to emerge over time. Over the past 10 years, NBA champs have, on average, entered the playoffs with fewer than one new starter from the previous year; the average time those teams' longest-paired duos had played together: 6.8 seasons. By contrast, Kyrie Irving is the Cavs' *only* returning starter, and he and Tristan Thompson are their longest-teamed duo, with all of three years together. And neither has any playoff experience. Team-building retreat, anyone?

Average tenure of longest-paired duo

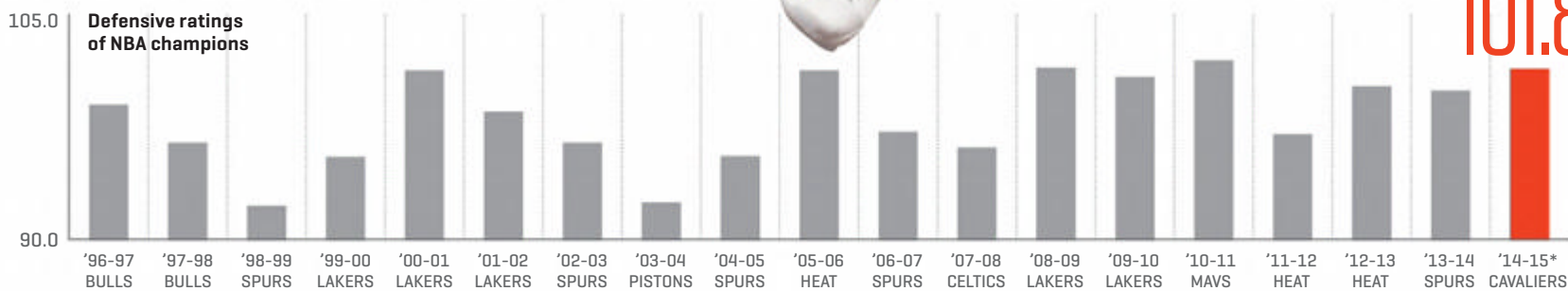
- Last 10 NBA champs
- 2014-15 Cavaliers

6.8

3.0

THEY'RE TOO CAVALIER ABOUT PLAYING DEFENSE

If history teaches anything [other than to *never* draft a big man with bad knees], it's that teams don't win titles without an elite D. Twelve of the past 18 champs featured top-five defenses (see below; the lower the better). The Cavs have improved since their in-season trades for wings Iman Shumpert and J.R. Smith and rim-protecting Russian Timofey Mozgov (against whom foes shoot only 46 percent at the rim). But since those deals, they still rank just 12th in DRTg [101.8]. That ain't gonna D it.



*SINCE JAN. 13, WHEN THE CAVS' CURRENT STARTING FIVE DEBUTED.

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WHY THEY WILL WIN...

WITH REST FOR THE WEARY, OPPONENTS HAD BEST BE WARY

Give the Cavs a bit of time off and they'll make you suffer. Since the Jan. 13 debut of the team's current starting five—Irving, Smith, LeBron, Love and Mozgov—Cleveland is 26-4 with at least one day of rest prior to a game. That winning percentage (see right) tops the full-season mark for any other NBA team. And the playoffs, in case you hadn't marked your calendar, offer at least a day off between each contest.

Full-season winning percentage for projected playoff teams with rest

.867
CAVALIERS

WARRIORS	.814
HAWKS	.776
ROCKETS	.724

GRIZZLIES	.707
SPURS	.655
TRAIL BLAZERS	.644
BULLS	.638
CLIPPERS	.627
MAVERICKS	.607
RAPTORS	.607
WIZARDS	.583
BUCKS	.561
THUNDER	.525
NETS	.508
CELTICS	.383

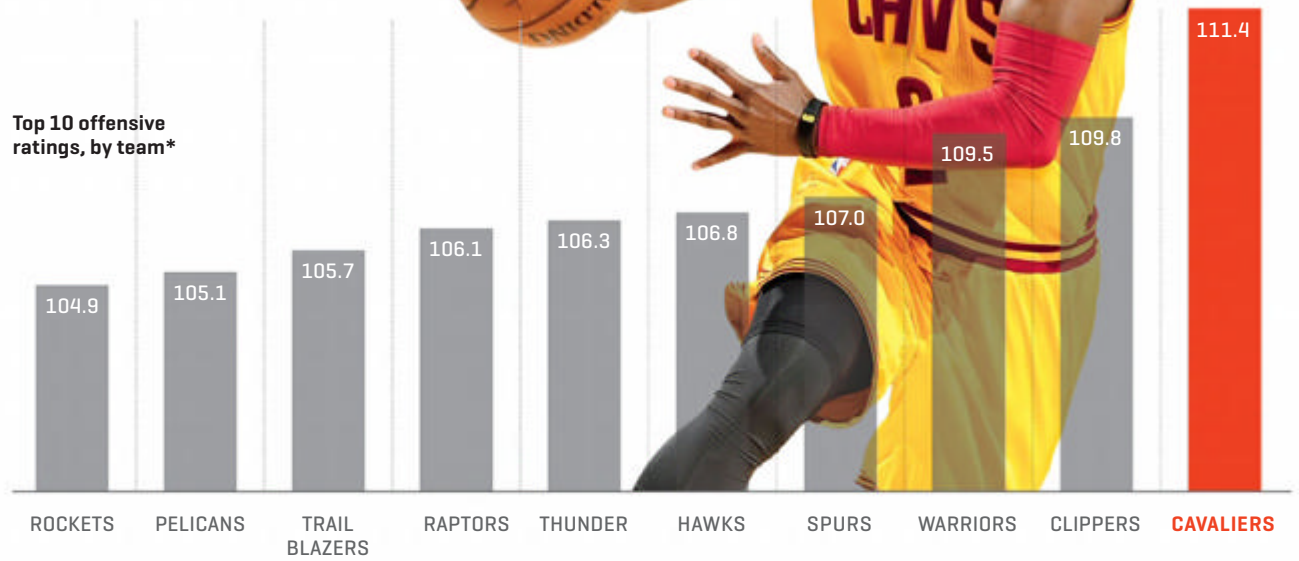


WHEN YOUR NUMBER GETS CALLED

**THEIR "O" IS FOR ...
"OH, WOW!"**

After the Cavs' starting five debuted on Jan. 13, the team won 31 of its next 39, fueled by an explosive offense that boasts an East-leading 37.2 percent of shots from 3. They lead the NBA with 111.4 points per 100 possessions and actually have one of the most efficient offenses in history. Since 2000, only Mike D'Antoni's Suns of 2004-05 (111.9 ORtg), 2006-07 (111.4) and 2009-10 (112.7) were more productive. And to think they're still learning how to play together ... and learning Blatt's system ... and learning to use Love. Learn all that? Then it's time to learn how to hoist a trophy.

Top 10 offensive ratings, by team*



*SINCE JAN. 13. ALL STATS THROUGH APRIL 7.
FROM LEFT: NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID LIAM KYLE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

**WHO WILL
YOU BE?**

EVERY SEASON STARTS AT
DICK'S
SPORTING GOODS.



TECHNIQUE

SKULL SESSION: ABBY WAMBACH ON HER HEADER

With concussions a hot topic in sports, soccer players can be reluctant to head the ball. But not U.S. star Abby Wambach, the world's all-time leading international scorer (178 and counting), who's notched 75 goals with her noggin. To minimize risk, the 5-foot-11 forward takes necessary precautions—developing proper form, strengthening neck muscles and even partnering in 2014 with Triax, a U.S.-based product development company that's created a headband to monitor head impacts. "Concussions are a real concern, and that's why I like to teach kids the proper technique in heading the ball," Wambach says. Here's how the two-time Olympic gold medalist uses both body and mind on her header, which she'll likely display when the U.S. opens against Australia at the Women's World Cup on June 8.

—ANNA KATHERINE CLEMMONS

1 "When I played high school basketball, I jumped off my right foot because I'd go higher. So no matter which side I'm running into the box on, I'm jumping off my right."

2 "I see the ball the whole way and time my jump so my body is where it needs to be. Reading the ball as soon as it comes off the foot helps me get my body there."

3 "When I leave the ground, I lose some power. Swinging my arms creates momentum. Then I also have them at my sides for protection against defenders."

4 "I want to head the ball with the hardest part of my head, so I go for my hairline. I want to head it when I reach the height of my jump and start to descend."

5 "Wherever my eyes go is where the ball will end up going. Most people don't realize that heading goes against everything normal, because no one wants to hit their head."

6 "I follow through, controlling everything until the last moment. Then you just land. You'd think I'd step on people's feet and roll my ankles, but luckily I haven't that often."





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UP TO 700 LBS. LIGHTER. BUT MORE CAPABLE AND INNOVATIVE THAN EVER.

The first and only pickup with a high-strength, military-grade, aluminum-alloy body. Up to 700 lbs. lighter so you can haul even more /// Class-Exclusive Stowable Loading Ramps* /// Class-Exclusive 360-Degree Camera with Split-View Display* /// Class-Exclusive LED Side Mirror Spotlights* /// Best-In-Class Gas EPA-Estimated Rating: 26 HWY MPG** /// THIS IS THE FUTURE OF TOUGH.

THE ALL-NEW F-150

/// FORD.COM



Class is Full-Size Pickups under 8,500 lbs. GVWR. *Available feature. **EPA-estimated rating of 19 city/26 hwy/22 combined mpg, 2.7L EcoBoost® V6, 4x2. Actual mileage will vary.



An illustration by Alexander Wells showing a close-up of a motorcycle's front wheel and handlebars. The wheel is black with a silver rim. In the background, there are several woven baskets filled with various fruits, including apples and oranges. The scene is set in a rustic, possibly outdoor or semi-outdoor, environment with wooden structures visible.

Jason Rabedeaux Was Here

ONCE ONE OF COLLEGE BASKETBALL'S BRIGHTEST COACHES, JASON RABEDEAUX DIED MYSTERIOUSLY IN SAIGON, LEAVING LOVED ONES AND COLLEAGUES TO GRAPPLE WITH HOW FAR HE'D FALLEN.

BY WRIGHT THOMPSON



JASON RABEDEAUX DIED WITHOUT SHOES IN THE BACK SEAT OF A SAIGON TAXICAB,

somewhere between his apartment tower on the bleak outskirts of the city and a hospital with a name he couldn't pronounce. He wore a red T-shirt. Blood loss had left him white and cold. Nobody expected this—a suspicious gash on his arm and a cut on his head—but people had been expecting something. For the past two weeks, he'd been acting strange. In the hours before he died, in the locker room dressing for what would be his final game, he'd struggled to get his belt through the loops of his pants—such a long fall for a man once considered among the hottest young college basketball coaches in the States, a man with charisma and drive yet broken in ways he could never win enough to fix. When the last game ended, tears welled in his eyes as he called it one of the biggest victories of his career, which

had taken him in the past 15 years from head coach at UTEP to a series of international teams around Asia and the Middle East, his paycheck growing smaller with each passing year.

The sun was just coming up in his final minutes, bringing his neighborhood out of darkness. His building sat at the intersection of two dead-end streets, not quite rural but not quite urban, surrounded by abandoned, half-finished buildings and fields of camphor-weed and Madras thorn trees. In the flat glow of morning light, six condo staff members had struggled to carry him to the cab, his eyes open, his breathing shallow. He weighed more than 300 pounds, nearly twice what he weighed at UTEP. All six building employees recognized him as the 49-year-old coach of

the Saigon Heat who lived on the 13th floor. A young Vietnamese woman performed mouth-to-mouth and screamed again and again for him to wake up. Her wails stayed with them long after the taxi sped away.

Nobody could really say how he died, or why, not in the first hours and not in the months that would follow. In America and in Ho Chi Minh City, still called Saigon by locals, people could only guess. Family members initially told some people he'd had a heart attack. On the advice of the team, they requested no autopsy be performed. The insurance policy paid off only in the event of an accidental death. The Vietnamese media described an "accident" at home. One of his former players suspected murder, and the deep cut on his left forearm is what ER doctors

call a nightstick injury, almost always a defensive wound. Friends wondered about alcohol, even drugs. It was a mystery. The death certificate, written in Vietnamese, listed the cause of death as a traumatic brain injury.

SAIGON CAN BE a dangerous place, not only because of what someone might do to you there but because of what you are allowed to do to yourself. People and their intentions come whole and leave broken. Every vice is for sale: cheap beer, snake liquor and easily scored hard drugs; private clubs where women are for rent hide above parking garages, and streetwalkers stand alone in the neon rot of crumbling doorways. There are still opium dens, like something from a 19th-century travel novel. Shame and regret grow faster than the mold creeping in wide tongues up the narrow slum alley houses. This is where the universe, with its vicious sense of humor, summoned Jason Rabedeaux in late 2011. It was the only coaching job in the world he could get. “A lot of doors were closing on him,” said his agent, Keith Kreiter—actually his former agent, because Jason went radio silent on him.

Rabedeaux was a refugee and a runaway in a city founded and sustained by them. Throughout the long history of this part of the world, people would come south toward the Mekong Delta when they had nowhere else to go. Saigon was founded by exiles. The wild, beating heart of the city was out in the swamps, a place called Rung Sat—named “The Jungle of Assassins” by the French—where the hustlers and smugglers, pirates, gangsters and revolutionaries hid and plotted. The brothels and opium dens in Old Saigon were run and supplied from Rung Sat, and the leader of the river pirates—a man later forced by the CIA into exile in Paris, where he’d walk down the Champs-Élysées with a tiger on a leash—ran the city as a kingdom.

It doesn’t matter whether you believe in ghosts; the Vietnamese do, deeply, the incense burning on altars around the country lit as a peace offering to the dead. When the living don’t have incense, they light and leave upturned cigarettes. The dead inhabit the things they touched and the places they died. The city’s skin and bones might be long, wide avenues and airy cafés serving Ricard and water at sunset, but its blood and guts are the

mangrove swamps of Rung Sat. The two worlds—the modern city of international banks, expense-account drinkers and ironic boomtown cafés, and the hot, green surrounding jungle—are often ports of last resort. Foreigners eye other foreigners with a mix of curiosity and suspicion. “I always wonder when I meet people,” says Harry Hodge, a reporter who covers the team, “Why are you here?”

Although many who come to live in Saigon are running away from who they used to be, Jason Rabedeaux was doing the opposite. He wanted his old life back, the life he’d utterly destroyed. In 1999, a young man, just 34, he’d been hired as the head coach at UTEP, replacing the legendary Don Haskins. By 2001, he was named Western Athletic Conference coach of the year. “He had the world by the balls,” says his former assistant and best friend, Bobby Champagne, now head coach at North Alabama. “He had a house up on the hill and two country club memberships. A wife and two kids and another on the way.”

THEN HE STARTED losing. He began drinking heavily, to manage the stress, and started to take advantage of his celebrity. Champagne knew something was wrong when Rabedeaux missed a flight to visit a recruit; he got drunk at a bar near the airport instead. He lied to his assistants and his wife, Stephanie, not answering his phone. Stephanie went to a football game with recruits, and Rabedeaux didn’t show; most everyone soon found out he was having an affair. At the end, when Stephanie packed up and took the kids, she and the mistress were both three months pregnant. He’d thrown everything away, and in the darkness of a collapsing life, he knew it. Soon after, a local woman called into a live radio show and confronted him on his philandering. Five days later, he resigned. The school took away his big salary and his country clubs and his courtesy car. Champagne saw Rabedeaux riding around El Paso on a bicycle. He lost the big house, and he lost his wife, his two sons and the unborn daughter who would never live under a roof with her dad.

Guilt and loneliness defined the coming years. After drinking himself out of an assistant coaching job at Marquette, he landed in China, then Japan, then Bahrain, sometimes drunk, sometimes sober. He talked about his children

constantly, even if he didn’t see them much: Maybe he sacrificed a life with them to preserve himself in their imaginations, wanting them to remember him for the man he used to be, not the one he was becoming. Basketball threw everything at him—a civil war in Bahrain prompting several members of his team to join the army, a brawl getting him suspended from a Chinese semipro league for a year—and in late 2011, when nobody else wanted him, he found out about an opening for an assistant coach in Saigon.

“Capable rejects,” Saigon Heat owner and general manager Connor Nguyen says, including himself, a man who came to Asia to try again. “We’re trying to build something on rejects.”

Nguyen interviewed Rabedeaux, an extremely capable reject, overqualified to be an assistant coach in the upstart ASEAN Basketball League, a man with an undeniable basketball genius and his own haunted past. Rabedeaux got the job.

THE TRIBE GATHERED to say goodbye at the Congregational United Church of Christ in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, less than two weeks after Rab died. Old coaches and players walked from rental cars toward the tall stone tower. Tom Crean came from Indiana, sharing his private jet with an NBA scout and an assistant who knew Rab. The funeral was during an open contact period, so most of Rabedeaux’s old running buddies were out recruiting. “I thought there’d be more coaches,” Bobby Champagne would say. He sat in a pew with former boss Kelvin Sampson.

Sampson gave the eulogy. His voice cracked when he said Rabedeaux spent 11 years working for him, first at Washington State, then at Oklahoma. Nobody there knew how guilty he felt over Rabedeaux’s death. He saw Bobby in the pew and remembered better times. “For a while there,” Kelvin said, smiling, “they were partners in crime.”

Stephanie, Rabedeaux’s ex-wife, saw all these spectral reminders of a life she’d abandoned. She’d left coaching behind a dozen years before, and now these guys moved back through her life like shadows. Anger and regret surely welled up inside her. The preacher talked about failure and weakness and shame, a melancholy sermon, reading from Paul and Timothy’s letters, about the dark night of the soul, when anxiety and

loneliness separated man from God. He talked of fighting the good fight, of finishing the race, of keeping the faith. The coaches hugged Rabedaux's family, then got back into those cars and headed out to scout, or recruit, or stare at endless hours of tape, hoping to trade one more piece of themselves for a win. Few coaching stories have happy endings, and almost every career is defined by loss.

ONE OF HIS first team events, in December 2011, set the tone for the weirdness he'd discover in Vietnam. As reflected light on the lush tropical trees made everything glow green, the Saigon Heat gathered at the zoo, which held a community outreach program for the team. The old Botanical Gardens, with carefully manicured shrubs and the hushed shade of tall, wide-leafed trees, evoked the long-vanished French colonial capital: cool breezes, green wrought iron gates, with Saigon spelled out in a deco font straight from a Paris Métro sign. A long avenue stretched from the entrance down to a blue-and-white tent. Monkeys screeched and slammed against the bars of their cage. Loud, strange circus music played, and Rabedaux kept looking at his head coach, Rob Newson, as if to say: *Where in the hell are we?*

But he was already starting to understand his new home, which he saw as a place where chaos and beauty lived in harmony. At the zoo, he grinned and sweated and high-fived the Vietnamese families who stopped to gawk at the tall Americans and the portable basketball hoop, moms pushing strollers, dads with diaper bags in one hand and lit cigarettes in the other. Old ladies hid from the heat under their conical straw hats. Newson watched Rabedaux work the crowd, and the Englishman had never met a more American person in his life: bubbly, open to strangers and, most of all, loud. His former players and coaching colleagues back home would have recognized him at the zoo that day. They knew the Rabedaux who brought his own boom box into locker rooms for elaborate celebration skits, who did spot-on impersonations of many famous college coaches. "He was great at birthday parties," Sampson would say later. People gravitated toward his ineffable spark. A friend in Saigon said she knew when he walked into a room even with her back turned.

He threw himself into his new team, often the



**"WE WERE
GOING
TO GET
MARRIED,
HAVE A
FAMILY."**

HONG-NHUNG "EVA" NGUYEN

first to arrive at the office, talking late into the night with Connor Nguyen about players they might get to come to Vietnam. The team started off with seven straight losses, and Nguyen made Jason Rabedaux his new head coach, demoting Newson. In some small way, he'd reclaimed a piece of what he'd lost.

He recruited relentlessly, as he'd done as an assistant coach for Sampson at Washington State and Oklahoma. In the players he brought to Vietnam, NBA rejects and college stars a step slow for the league, he saw their deepest insecurities, one basketball exile understanding another. He found the one place in Saigon that sold American Gatorade and bought bottles by the armfuls for homesick players.

With strict rules limiting the number of Americans on the team, most of the players were Vietnamese. Total, Rabedaux knew about 15 Vietnamese words, and over and over during games he'd yell *nam muoi!*, which is slang for fifty-fifty, as in: It's a fifty-fifty ball, so hustle. Curious locals started coming to games and saw the lunatic American coach sweat and scream. One practice, he picked up a stone on his walk to the practice gym, a trip he made nearly every day, past the barbershops and street food carts lining the road from his apartment. The team needed to be like this stone, he told the players, weathered and beaten yet still strong. In his other hand, he pulled out a raw egg, and he told them this is what they played like: tough-looking on the outside but soft inside. Then he crushed the egg in his hands, yolk going everywhere.

They didn't win much, missing the playoffs his first two seasons. During that time, he never drank with his co-workers, or with anyone, explaining to people that he'd had problems in the past. For two years, in fact, the people who saw him every day insist he kept himself sober, a kind of personal miracle. With poor results on the court, the team looked for a reason to fire him with cause so it wouldn't have to pay out his guaranteed contract. It couldn't find one.

Always rumored to be shutting down for good, the league hung on to existence. Looking for intel and passing along tips, Rabedaux would meet Harry Hodge, the local beat writer, beneath the red awnings of Highlands Coffee, built like a lean-to on the back of the Opera House. Around front, the singsong tune of the ice cream man filled the air while teenage girls lounged on the steps and took selfies. The idling motorcycle drivers mistook his white face for a rich one, trying to sell their services. He barely made enough to pay child support back home. One cab driver who'd take him back to his apartment appreciated him sitting in the front seat and how, despite not speaking any Vietnamese, he always tried to smile.

HE MET A GIRL. Her name was Hong-Nhung Nguyen, which translates as Red Velvet, like the cake. A petite woman with wavy long hair, foreigners called her Eva. She was nearly 22 and worked at his first apartment building, a towering community called The Flemington,

a Western enclave with an attached grocery store and a KFC. On the wide avenue running in front of it, 200 motorbikes sped past for every car, the air thick with the exhaust and flutter of four-stroke engines. Inside, five women manned the counter, helping residents navigate the strange world beyond the shiny glass doors. One of them was Eva, and Rabedaux zeroed in immediately. Classic Rab. Pushing 300 pounds now, having gained weight steadily since his divorce, he still fancied himself a man who had game, which, oddly, he did. Jonathan Jones, one of his players, worried that a jealous husband or angry father would come after Rabedaux one day. Connor Nguyen never bothered meeting Eva, believing she was just another of Coach's girls.

Rabedaux asked Eva to marry him the first time they met.

She laughed in his face.

"Don't joke with me," she said.

"I'm serious," he said.

She asked his age.

"Thirty-five," he lied.

Whenever he'd pass her desk, he'd smile. She'd smile back. They became friends, then six months later, more. When he renegotiated his contract, he needed a copy of his passport and asked her to take care of it. She saw his birthday; he was more than a decade older than 35.

Angry, she confronted him. He tried to negotiate and flirt his way out of his lie, bringing her an apple and chocolate milk for breakfast and lunch every day for a month. She searched his name on the Internet, and the past of the man she was falling in love with scrolled before her eyes, all of it, the women and the scandal, the meteoric rise and the long, slow, spiraling fall. Her feelings scared her; she'd never dated a foreigner before, and when her friends asked why she cared for this overweight older man, she tried to explain that she'd never met someone as charismatic, or as intense about his work, or as kind when speaking about his mother. He invited her to China, where he coached in the offseason to make extra money, her first trip outside Vietnam. They spent six days together, and she demanded he tell her everything, all his mistakes and sins, to see if he were worthy of her love. He told her about his divorce, most of it anyway, and one day, he promised he'd go for a walk with her after his

game. It's a promise he'd made and broken to everyone in his life going on 20 years, that he'd be with them once basketball finished. He got home exhausted, but he kept his word. They held hands, strolling through an empty Chinese city at 2 a.m., and he sang her silly songs, making up the words on the spot.

"Happy day," he sang in Vietnamese.

"Happy day."

These were indeed the happiest years of Rabedaux's life. He and Eva started to make plans, real plans, talking about marriage and children. He traveled to her province to meet her mom and dad. They called each other "honey," and she programmed it into her phone with his number. She got a new job, at a milk company, and in the morning, he'd wake her up singing, "Honey, wake up, go to the Vinamilk Tower!" In the morning, he'd make coffee for both of them and then walk her to the elevator. He let her into his secrets, telling about his mistakes as a father and husband. Whenever the stress got really bad, he'd make her American meals, often spaghetti, and tell her about his hometown, and his mother, and the cold Wisconsin winters. He wanted to take her there.

"We were going to go to America," she'd say later. "We were going to get married. We were going to have a family."

She agreed to move in with him when he began preparing for the 2014 season, in April. Her parents did not approve but couldn't control their daughter. She started the process of trying for a visa, which isn't technically impossible for a young, single female but is something very close to it.

THREE MONTHS AFTER *the funeral, Bobby Champagne sips his icy mug of beer and remembers what he and his friend Jason wanted to be, all those years ago, when they were young and everything seemed possible.*

"Everybody has those grand illusions," he says.

Dick Vitale once called Rabedaux one of the five hot coaches to watch. Around the same time, the Sporting News called Champagne the WAC assistant most likely to get a DI job.

He's still waiting.

"I'm at North Alabama," he says, smiling thinly, shaking his head.

Bobby seems melancholy, not his usual

hail-fellow cynical jokester. His team has just lost, and played soft, and he worries that yelling at the players will make them turn on each other. He's had a lot of success here but always worries about getting fired. The stress eats at him. He finishes his one beer and leaves. No late night for him. His family is waiting at home. He never made it to the top, and he'll never take a team to the Final Four, but he has a yellow brick house on a corner three blocks from his office, and he comes home many afternoons to see his kids after school. He walks to work. His beautiful wife is not an ex. Bobby is one of the lucky few. He's a good man, and would be judged an enormous success in every single profession except the one he chose.

NO MATTER HOW far away from home he felt in the streets of Vietnam, Rabedaux believed he would coach again in the United States. This belief sustained him, from his first moments in Saigon. He'd talk about it, to the other coaches, or at night in his first apartment with his roommate, journeyman center Jonathan Jones, in the honest moments before sleep. Rabedaux was waiting on Sampson to save him. "Once Kelvin got a job," Jones says, "Rab was gonna be on the first thing smoking."

Kelvin already had rescued Rab once before—from the hoops wasteland of an obscure Division III school—making him part of his staff at Washington State in 1989. Basketball was Rabedaux's vice; he barely drank, had never smoked pot or cigarettes. Since his adolescence in Wisconsin, he'd searched in locker rooms for the family he'd wanted since his split apart, and with Sampson, he found it. His compulsiveness, always a handicap, found a purpose; he arrived at Sampson's door broken, and this new job made him whole.

Rabedaux followed Sampson to Oklahoma, becoming a top assistant and a man feared by the other coaches competing with him for players. He wrote as many as 30 letters a day to recruits in handwriting that people confused for calligraphy. Mostly, he saw things in players that no one else saw. Once he and Kelvin flew to Dallas and, before walking into a gym, Rab said, "Don't be mad." The player, Ernie Abercrombie, was an overweight guard with no other DI offers. He became a star. A few years later, Rabedaux took Kelvin to an empty gym where



AROUND THE WORLD

When Rabedeaux's hoop dreams fell apart stateside, he looked for success anywhere else.

NORTH AMERICA

1988-89

NORTH ADAMS STATE

Assistant

1989-94

WASHINGTON STATE

Assistant

1994-99

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

Assistant

1999-2002

UTEP

Head coach

46-46

2004-08

MARQUETTE

Assistant

a dad was rebounding for his son, a slow-footed white kid. Kelvin eyed Rab and asked, "What are we doing here?" The slow-footed kid, Tim Heskett, broke 3-point shooting records at Oklahoma, helped the team to four straight NCAA tournaments. "He had a thing for underdogs and kids with a chip on their shoulder," Sampson says. "That's what Rab was."

They rose together, inseparable, Rabedeaux lounging around the Sampson house like one of his kids, raiding the pantry and fridge. The Sampson in-laws loved him too, and when they came to visit, he'd sit with them at the table: Kelvin, his two kids, his wife, his wife's parents ... and Rab. Long desperate for a stable father, after losing his own to divorce, he burrowed himself into the Sampson family. Without fail, Rabedeaux called Kelvin before going to sleep, every single night.

One year the Sampson family vacationed at the end of the world, an Alaskan fishing village named Haines, which sits in the cold, blue void between the bobbing masts in the marina and the snowcapped mountains of the Chilkat Range. The trip complete, a float plane readied to take them to Juneau, where they'd catch a flight back home. Fog rolled in, and nothing could take off or land. The Sampsons caught a ferry, then found a roadside motel in Juneau four or five hours later. Kelvin had tossed his luggage on the bed, exhausted, when the room's phone rang.

"Coach, what you doing?" Rabedeaux asked.

Sampson stared at the phone.

"Rab," he said, stunned, "how did you know I was in this room?"

"I got ways," Rab said.

He'd called the fishing village, then checked the ferry schedules, then called every hotel in Juneau until he found the right one. "We had the wrong person looking for bin Laden," Kelvin would joke years later, before turning wistful. "I've never seen a person like that. He was almost like your soul mate. I catch myself holding my assistants to Rab's standard."

His co-workers envied Rabedeaux's scouting reports, page after page of detail and sketches of offensive and defensive sets, something from

A Beautiful Mind. All his life, Rabedeaux had been OCD, carefully hoarding and collecting and organizing even little soaps and shampoos from hotel rooms, and now he had license to let himself become a raging maniac, hyperfocused and one-tracked, all in the name of the cause. Not only wasn't he damaged any longer, he was an almost perfect coaching machine, as long as someone gave him tasks and rewarded him with praise, and later, his friends would wonder whether maybe he should have stayed with Sampson forever. He burned bright. Sometimes, he'd do pushups and situps during staff meetings, shedding excess energy. The best assistant coaches are crazy people, and a few of the best assistants become head coaches. Every head coach, no matter how rich or famous or slick, used to be a top assistant and is, therefore, nuts. Maybe the job self-selects for broken people, or maybe it breaks them, but coaching is not for the well-adjusted. Nobody was less well-adjusted than Rabedeaux, so schools soon came calling. In 1999, UTEP offered him his dream job.

He didn't know whether he wanted it.

Rabedeaux came over to Sampson's house, offer in hand, confused and scared. The men sat at the round table where they'd celebrated wins and mourned losses. They talked for hours. Rab bounced from laughter to tears. It's as if he already sensed what waited for him when he left Sampson behind. Rabedeaux looked around, nostalgic and sad.

"I'll never be in this room again," he said.

"Rab, this is your chance," Kelvin said.

Finally Rabedeaux stood to leave. Nothing would ever be the same again, and no matter how melodramatic that sounds, it remains true. His life broke into two halves: the rise, which led to a round table at the Sampson house in Norman, Oklahoma, and the fall, which began almost as soon as he walked away.

"You're ready," Kelvin said, and he was wrong.

In El Paso, away from the clarity of working hard to please Sampson, he lost himself, breaking back apart; his new bosses suspected he'd been battling these personal demons for years and now he was losing whatever control

he'd managed to sustain in Norman. The coming years took things from both of them. Rabedeaux resigned at UTEP and lost his job at Marquette and eventually washed up in Asia; after moving to Indiana, Sampson and his staff committed so many recruiting violations that the NCAA effectively banned him from coaching in college for five years—the rarely used "show cause" penalty. He rode out his own exile as a bench coach in the NBA. The five-year ban ended in November 2013, while Rab coached in China during the Heat off-season. Both needed a second chance. Kelvin didn't want to end his career as an NBA assistant with a bad reputation.

Rabedeaux was either sober in March 2014 or hiding his addiction masterfully, hoping to win enough games to catch the attention of someone willing to take a chance, knowing in his heart that only one man might be willing to overlook the mess he'd made of the previous 12 years. In the past month, his mom had been sick, in and out of the hospital, and he wrote Connor Nguyen from a visit to Wisconsin on March 25 and confided, "I fear this is the last time I will see her ... I hate to think that way, but she is breaking down."

Another basketball season beckoned. It was time to go back to Saigon.

He waited in the Chicago airport for his flight, preparing to leave behind a sick mother and three kids he didn't see on his last trip home, once again not matching the promise of his words with the follow-through of his actions. On the road with the Rockets, somewhere between Toronto and Brooklyn, Kelvin was one day from being announced as the new head coach of the University of Houston.

His phone rang.

"No pressure," Rabedeaux began, and, humble and desperate, he asked Sampson for a job. Sampson tried to be gentle, couldn't bring himself to say no, but by the time the call ended, Jason Rabedeaux knew he'd burned his final bridge, toxic even to his surrogate father. There'd be no reunion, no chance to go back to that round table and start again.

He landed the next day in Saigon. Eva says

2008-10

JIANGSU
NANGAN

CHINA

Head coach

56-26

2010

LINK TOCHIGI
BREX

JAPAN

Assistant

2011

AL
MANAMA

BAHRAIN

Assistant

2012

SICHUAN

CHINA

Assistant

2013

QINGDAO
DOUBLE STAR

CHINA

Assistant

2012-14

SAIGON HEAT

VIETNAM

Head coach

18-30

she soon started finding vodka bottles hidden in the drawers with his clothes.

TOM CREAN PUTS *his feet up on a table in the afterglow of a win, safe for a night from the Indiana fans who want him fired. He's thought about Rab a lot since the funeral. Little things remind him. Two times this season, the Hoosiers played at Madison Square Garden, and both times, he stepped into the enormous old freight elevator and laughed because every time Marquette went to the Garden, Rab would sit and pretend to be the crusty elevator operator.*

Bad memories inevitably follow the good ones: Rab under the influence on the bench and unable to diagram a press break in the closing possession against Georgetown, or when Crean had to demote him from assistant coach to director of basketball operations, or when he couldn't bring Rab to Indiana in 2008, worried the scrutiny of the Hoosiers fans and reporters would make hiding an alcoholic impossible. His friends went to Indiana, and Rab went overseas looking for work. Crean remembers the many sides of Rab: the comedian; the flawed genius with a high SAT score and an innate understanding of basketball; the overgrown kid; the depressed, insecure man who'd call him at night in tears, who knew what he'd thrown away.

"He was lonely," Crean says.

Crean tried over and over to save him, dipping into his own pocket, staging interventions, getting him medical help and talking to addiction specialists, working to make sure the public—and more important, Rabedeaux's kids—never found out. Rab talked about his children constantly to anyone who'd listen. That's why Crean thought Rab was worth saving. "I'm gonna tell you what it is," he says in his office, his voice hoarse from the game. "We got close to those boys. I never met his daughter until the funeral. He was a great father, and he was in fear of those boys not respecting him or knowing that their dad was good at what he did. I was very protective of that. He was so scared of losing contact, losing respect, not being a sufficient father."

Crean found out Rab died from another

coach, the way coaches find out about all bad news, a text message early in the morning, and he didn't cry that day, or the next. He didn't cry at all until the funeral ended and he walked to the front of the church and hugged Rabedeaux's oldest son, Beau.

SOME OF THE people at the Heat office noticed something wrong with Rabedeaux when he got back to Saigon. He'd be belligerent, reeking of booze. At restaurants, he caused scenes, shouting and dropping food on himself. At practice, the players noticed too. Word got back to Connor Nguyen, who already suspected, mostly because of incoherent text messages, the hint of a word lost in a jumble of misplaced letters. On April 28, he asked Rabedeaux to meet him at a chain bakery in a high-end apartment complex. With exposed brick and plenty of light, the place felt completely Western.

"What's going on?" Nguyen asked.

"I'm struggling," Rabedeaux told him, explaining about missing his mom.

"Coach, what is it?" Nguyen pressed. "Are you drinking?"

"You know I don't drink."

"Are you taking drugs?"

"No."

Both left the bakery clear on the message: Another episode would end Rabedeaux's coaching career. Eva swears he'd stopped drinking by that meeting with Nguyen. Most people agree with her. Only one person, who asked not to be named, said he thought Rabedeaux switched to pills. It's hard to know. Nobody deceives more skillfully than an addict. Nguyen sensed a problem, and as insurance he brought in a new assistant, Tony Garbelotto, a veteran coach who'd lost his job in Germany. Rabedeaux recognized that his replacement was ready should he fail.

Eva's visa interview approached, scheduled for the morning of Sept. 8. The night before, the Heat faced the Westports Malaysia Dragons at home, badly needing a win to stay in playoff contention. They led by three with a little more than two minutes remaining. But Malaysia hit three of six free throws in the last minute and

won by three, another late-game lead thrown away. The cameras focused on Rabedeaux in the closing seconds, shaking his head. "We'd both been through hundreds and hundreds of games," Garbelotto says. "That one hurt him."

That day, Eva had gone to the U.S. Consulate. Officials asked questions and studied her application and then, against the odds, approved her visa. She could go with Jason on Thanksgiving, and take the first steps of their new life in America. She rushed from the building, giddy, ready to share this news with Rabedeaux.

She came home, walked into the apartment beaming, almost floating.

She found him drunk.

HE CAME APART on the 13th floor. The day after his team lost by three, he missed a video session with Garbelotto, drunk. The fields outside his window closed in. Down the street at the barbershop, the songbirds sang in their cages, hung in the branches of a tree, and the chickens cowered and clucked, future dinner, held in a box of wire by the dirt and roots. Alone, Rabedeaux drank cans of Heineken, cracking one after another. Every few hours, he went downstairs to the La Casa Market and bought another six-pack from a skinny-armed, acne-scarred young man. The store didn't sell hard liquor. Only beer. The clerk counted as many as 48 cans a day.

His behavior at practice scared and confused people. Rabedeaux called players by the wrong names and repeated drills. Friday night, the Heat lost by three again. The next Tuesday, he missed practice. Days later, seeming to be making peace with the end of something, he confided in Tony.

"I think I had a solid career," he said.

Nightmares jerked him awake. Regrets kept him from falling back asleep. He'd missed his son's high school graduation and missed driving him to college in North Dakota, where he'd been recruited to play baseball. Often he promised he would visit his kids and didn't, and some thought he was selfish, and some thought he was so full of shame over his

appearance and his addictions that he didn't want them to look at the mess he'd made of his life. The memory of each missed rendezvous gave birth to more regret and shame. Back in Wisconsin, his mom hung on, and he missed this time with her too. And for what? His coaching career was going to end here. Nobody wanted him. Nguyen had nearly decided not to renew his contract, and although they hadn't discussed it, Rabedaux had to suspect. Even Kelvin Sampson wouldn't hire him. So many people had put their faith in him; during the last days with his mom, six months earlier, the two watched the NCAA tournament, and she talked hopefully of how he would be there again one day, wondering which of these fine programs he might choose. She still believed in him, and in two months, when he and Eva arrived in Eau Claire for Thanksgiving, he would no longer be a basketball coach. Her visa, which they both had wanted so desperately, now made him do what he'd refused to do for more than a decade: confront the wreckage of his personal life and figure out how he might put it back together again.

Eva left home every morning about 7:30, and he called and texted throughout the day. His voice would start to change as early as 8 a.m., and she realized he started drinking the moment she closed the door. When she returned from work, he clung to her, even following her into the bathroom while she took a shower. Over and over, he talked about how much he missed his kids, and how he hadn't been there for them. He talked all night, barely sleeping, and the next day the whole thing would start again, half a dozen or more trips down to the little market, buying Heinekens six at a time. By Friday, he couldn't keep any food down, and when he threw up, it was clear liquid. Spells of dizziness left him unstable on his feet.

Three times in the last four days of his life, he watched a movie about the life of Christ. He wasn't very religious. During the film, he'd pause the action and ask Eva questions. Two days before he died, he asked her, "When we die, where do we go?"

The sun came up on Sunday morning. After 14 days of free fall, only a handful of hours and the business of dying lay in front of Jason Rabedaux, but first he had to get his clipboard and markers and go coach one last game.

He looked ravaged, unsteady on his feet, struggling to thread his belt through the loop, and during the national anthems, his frown left such deep creases on his bloated, pale face that it seemed painted on with cheap circus makeup. They'd lost two games in a row, and a loss tonight would effectively eliminate them from the playoffs. Wiping his sweat with a towel, he worked the sideline.

Late in the game, the Heat holding on to a lead, the Indonesia Warriors put on full-court pressure and made their run. After a turnover in the backcourt, Rabedaux called timeout. Taking out his board and pen, he tried and failed to diagram their press break. Garbelotto took over and explained the play to the team. The Heat hung on and won the game.

"That's one of my greatest wins," Rab said afterward, fighting back tears. The next morning, Eva found him in their kitchen, cuts on his arm and head, lying in a spreading pool of blood, barely alive. One of the six men who carried him downstairs was the acne-scarred clerk who sold him beer. The police collected forensic evidence, questioned Eva twice and concluded he fell during the night, cutting his head on the counter and his arm on a sharp, exposed metal edge.

THE TEAM SENT a list of the things he left behind, a life reduced to an Excel spreadsheet. He died with a rice cooker and a microwave, two laptops and two iPads. Nine telephones and nine watches, 20 small plastic statues and one pair of glasses. Four pillows and 13 pairs of shoes. Five pictures, to remind him of home, and one Bose speaker.

He left behind Saigon, the city that offered him a second chance and took it away. Sometimes he'd talked to friends about the depravity of the city and sometimes he'd talked about the innocence, but he always understood how the place, perhaps more than any other he'd ever been in, reflected the inner conflicts of every exile who washed up on its streets. He left behind a mother who thought he did little wrong, and an ex-wife who thought he did little right, and three children caught in the middle. He left his three children behind long before he died—his daughter, 12 now, spent maybe 50 days with him—and in exchange he won 46 basketball games at UTEP, 56 in China and

18 more in Vietnam. His other wins and losses have faded away. Nobody remembers those games, each of which cost him another small piece of himself.

He left behind debt, more discovered every day as creditors hound his oldest son. The IRS wants money, and so do at least eight credit card collectors. The team, which found out about the financial issues after Rabedaux died, is working to pay the family a \$50,000 accidental death benefit, plus the remaining amount owed per his contract, but all of that will certainly be carved into pieces by his creditors. When all the lawyers and accountants are finished, Jason Rabedaux will have coached 26 years, in five countries, for a total of \$900—the amount in his money clip, which Eva found after he died and turned in to the team.

He left behind a mystery.

"Just to slip and fall and hit your head and you die," says former roommate Jonathan Jones. "That seems weird to me. That's not adding up."

"Did he do stuff we didn't know about?" Garbelotto says. "Was he going to the middle of Saigon and getting hard drugs? Everything is in play."

People considered every option. He overdosed. He killed himself. Someone attacked him, maybe a robber, or an angry father or husband. A drug deal went bad. Maybe Eva killed him. He died with the apartment door locked, while she slept, and nobody but Eva had a key.

The enduring mystery is shrouded by a strange refusal to solve it.

Many people in his life actively avoided discovery. Maybe they already imagined the worst. Maybe they're just private. But there's something else undoubtedly going on too, the fear of knowing too much, not just about Jason but about the whole nature of things. What if we remain prisoners of our mistakes, no matter how many years and continents we put between ourselves and our worst moments of weakness and shame? How much do we really want to pick at the thin scab of self-determination?

The team offered to dig some more and was told no.

Since Connor Nguyen didn't read Vietnamese, the autopsy report sat untranslated, and in January, he got the English text back, three and a half months after Rabedaux died. He sat in

the open-air concourse beneath their stadium, in a red chair. His lips moved as he read. A bird chirped and an engine revved, and it all seemed so ordinary. This was how secret lives come into focus, not with a dramatic reveal but as an email attachment.

He jerked back, as if he'd touched a wire.

"Wow," he mouthed silently.

He swallowed hard.

"They did toxicology," he said, reconsidering everything he thought he knew about the last day of his ex-coach's life. Jason Rabedeaux died sober, without a trace of drugs or alcohol in his system.

A LADDER LEANS *against the wall of Kelvin Sampson's new office in Houston. A short note from his old boss at Oklahoma wishes Sampson well. A deeper layer of symbolism is obvious: a ladder for a man climbing out of a hole he dug for himself. Sampson is getting the second chance he couldn't give his old friend. He's been haunted by his decision.*

"I thought about it when I first heard," he says.

Tears well up in his eyes, and he tries to blink them away, then hold a monotone until he regains control. That doesn't work. He wipes them away, then snuffles, and finally lets go. Photographs of the underdogs Jason recruited hang on the wall. "Give me a minute," he says, rubbing his face with his sleeve. He closes his eyes and remembers. "If I had hired Rab, he'd probably still be alive," he says finally. "That bothered me. That bothered me a lot. I knew his mother and father ..." and then he trails off, the second part of that horrible thought left unspoken. In his mind, he can see Rabedeaux's face, friendly and open, grinning after a win.

"He had big dreams," Kelvin says, and he starts to cry once more.

ALL THOSE DREAMS died in the months and years before he did, and on a Sunday afternoon in January, Eva comes into a fancy hotel lobby and confirms the accuracy of the autopsy. Outside the window by her seat, central Saigon swirls and buzzes, a place where money can fix anything, even a clean toxicology report, but she is adamant. His last drink came on Saturday afternoon, about 36 hours before he died. Nobody will ever know for sure what happened on the 13th floor, but the only

"TO SLIP AND FALL AND DIE? DOESN'T ADD UP."

FORMER ROOMMATE
JONATHAN JONES

conclusion supported by evidence to date is almost too heartbreaking to consider: Jason Rabedeaux didn't die from drinking; he died because he stopped.

Withdrawal from drugs or alcohol, known as delirium tremens, or the DTs, is fatal in up to 15 percent of cases, and severe dizziness and seizures are common. Everything else is conspiracy theory and unfounded suspicion, and even this is merely a logical guess. The truth, however ordinary or shocking, will never escape the long shadows of Saigon. Sitting by the window, Eva looks down in sorrow, her once long hair still growing back after she cut it in mourning, in the Vietnamese tradition. She quietly recounts the last hours of someone who didn't know he was about to die, and yet, on some level, sensed it. All he wanted was to escape, to go back to Wisconsin at the end of the season, about a month away. Talking about home dominated his final two days.

When she returned to the apartment from work Saturday, he stopped drinking. He never drank in front of her. It was 5:30 p.m. when she parked her bike and went upstairs. Sweat ran down his face, which looked clammy, and he struggled to find the energy to do anything. She begged him to go to the hospital. He said no. Sunday morning she made him breakfast,

a ham and cheese baguette. He threw it up immediately. She demanded once more that he go to the doctor.

"After the game," he promised.

The team won and he went back to the 13th floor. He hated living on the 13th floor, feeling as if the bad fortune he found didn't flow merely from his own decisions. Exhausted and shaky, he told her he'd go see a doctor in the morning. He looked awful. Eva made him the dish her mother always made when she was sick as a child, a rice porridge called *chao*. She added some fresh ginger, and he ate two bowls and kept them down. Water stayed down too. Before going to bed, she put a third bowl in the microwave and told him to heat it up if he felt hungry. In the morning, lost amid the horror of the blood and his body pressed up against the counter, rested the empty bowl of *chao* on the ground, unbroken.

He died at sunrise, leaving the world sober and a winner, briefly the same man who'd been saved by Kelvin Sampson. The final person who communicated with him, on Skype after the game, was a player he was trying to sign. Perfect, his friends would agree: The last thing Rab did before he died was recruit.

Eva found his calendar while packing his things.

He'd written in the date of their trip to Wisconsin, and she knew how his coaching journey would end. Jason would go home after all. Eva boarded an airplane, flying to Japan, then Minneapolis, sitting in a window seat, his ashes in her lap. The crematorium had given her the remains as she requested, a box with a crucifix on top. For almost 24 hours, Eva stayed awake out of respect. None of the other passengers knew what she held, and nobody asked. Her duty was clear. She would return the remains of a dead son to his mother. Everyone always called Jason a mama's boy. Eva held tight to the ashes until she arrived at Norma Rabedeaux's home. Inside, she found a table decorated with beautiful flowers and gently placed the box on it. Jason was finally home, and Norma showed Eva the town where her son had grown up and where he first played the game he chased around the world. Eva flew back to Saigon, a city of widows, of both second and lost chances. She came in low over the swamps, wondering how she might start again. ■





ESPN

Seven Rounds, Six Seasons & One Trip to Disneyland Later

SINCE THE SUPER BOWL, UNLIKELY STAR **JULIAN EDELMAN** HAS PARTIED HARD ENOUGH TO MAKE A GRONKOWSKI BLUSH. SORRY, BELICHICK, THAT'S JUST GOOD BUSINESS.

BY KEVIN VAN VALKENBURG

JULIAN EDELMAN IS hesitant, at first, to break out his Bill Belichick impression. He is well aware that even a playful needling of his head coach, the closest thing the NFL has to a Tywin Lannister, carries a certain amount of risk. But he cannot resist.

He's sitting in the back of his favorite Los Angeles sushi restaurant, Sushiya on Sunset Boulevard, chomping on a second plate of edamame and re-creating the moment when Belichick called him to say the Patriots were drafting him in the seventh round of the 2009 NFL draft. Edelman's impression is less an accurate rendering of his boss than it is a vocal marriage of Dick Cheney and Kermit the Frog, but it works because there are hints of

genuine affection in it. Edelman commits to the character in full, adding a half sneer and a furrowed brow: "I pick up the phone and he says to me, 'Eeeeeedelman, I don't know what we're going to do with you, but you're a hell of a football player.'"

The Patriots knew they were taking a flier on Edelman. A quarterback out of Kent State, he'd never played any of the positions—wide receiver, punt returner, cornerback—Belichick was contemplating for him. The team certainly had no intention of making him a Brady backup. But that phone call set in motion one of the most unique career arcs in recent NFL history. Edelman spent his first four years toiling on the margins, almost getting cut one year

Edelman racked up 109 yards on nine receptions in the Super Bowl, playing through a controversial helmet-to-helmet hit.

to the next, before exploding for 197 receptions over the past two seasons. He attained full New England folk hero status by catching the go-ahead score in this year's Super Bowl.

After fighting and clawing just to stay in the NFL for most of his career, it's safe to say that Edelman, 28, is enjoying his moment. Over the past three months, he has paraded through Disneyland, presented at the Grammys and become a fixture on the talk show circuit. He partied atop a duck boat during the Pats' Super Bowl parade, beating his chest, taking off his sweater in a mock striptease and punching out a giant picture of Richard Sherman. He popped up on a red carpet looking like Daniel Craig's James Bond and appeared in a blurry video lifting up his shirt for a flock of admiring females at a Harvard keg party. He, of course, screened the *Entourage* movie, in which he has a cameo, with Mark Wahlberg, Justin Bieber and Rob Gronkowski. He might have even passed Gronk as the team's Good Time Charlie when he showed up in a picture, either asleep or passed out in bed, posted by a woman on the dating app Tinder, alongside the caption, "Just f---ed Julian Edelman, no lie!" Gossip sites rejoiced. Edelman laughed it off.

But for Edelman, things aren't as carefree as they seem. After all, it was just three seasons ago, he says, that Belichick called him into his office and told him he was no lock to make the team. The Patriots are notoriously ruthless and unsentimental, and Edelman—who's spent most of his career playing at the league minimum—knows it. There are rules, and you break them at your own risk. You don't talk about injuries, especially concussions. (Edelman declined to discuss the apparent blow to his head during the Super Bowl.) And you're allowed to be playful and goofy only while you're at the top of your game.

"As long as you're doing your job on the field, you can have fun," Edelman says. "But if you start slipping, you're going to start hearing s---. Everything is about football with Bill. I love the guy to death. He's the man who gave me the opportunity. But I know the day I start slipping, the day I'm not producing enough and there is somebody cheaper, I'm gone. That's just Coach."

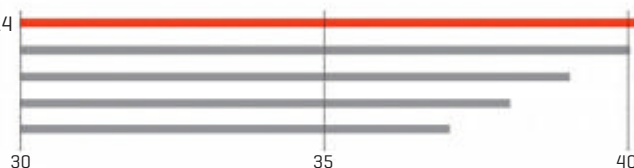
Which is why, despite what his extended post-Super Bowl tour de fiesta might have you believe, Edelman is living the life of a football monk. A mere 40 days into his offseason—a



MAN OF THE MOMENT

Edelman's 42 playoff receptions over the past two seasons is the most ever during a five-game playoff span.

Julian Edelman, 2013-14
Wes Welker, 2007-11
Hines Ward, 2001-04
Ernest Givins, 1989-92
Many players tied



42

time when most players are still recovering from the grind of a long year—he insists on eating nothing but edamame and drinking ice water (with lemon) for lunch while he chats.

"I'm actually on this crazy little diet right now," he says. "I try to pack all my nutrients into a smoothie right when I wake up. I'll go out to restaurants at night sometimes, but I count pretty much every calorie."

If it seems strange that the receiver could live

simultaneous lives of excess and asceticism, the explanation is simple: He understood, long ago, that all of this could be gone tomorrow.

PART OF EDELMAN'S calculus this offseason has been trying to figure out how to maximize his time in the spotlight. In the era of Chris Borland, every NFL player is thinking more about his future, and over the past year, Edelman has put in motion a calculated

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"THE DAY I'M NOT PRODUCING ENOUGH AND THERE IS SOMEBODY CHEAPER, I'M GONE."

JULIAN EDELMAN

business strategy, literally designed to capitalize on his moment in the spotlight.

Turns out, he knows what he's doing. Two years ago he teamed with a Boston marketing firm called Superdigital to build and grow his Internet stardom. And lately, their efforts have kicked into overdrive. He films comedy sketches to post on YouTube, and although higher-profile stars have more followers, Superdigital claims that fans interact with Edelman on social media at a higher rate than any other NFL player outside of J.J. Watt. Whether or not that's true, it's hard to find a pro athlete who leverages his digital brand

more deliberately than the Pats receiver.

"I think Jules has always approached his career with a small-business mentality," says his father, Frank Edelman, a mechanic and the owner of A-1 Auto Tech in Mountain View, California. It's a month after the Patriots' Super Bowl triumph and, dressed in a blue shirt with his name stitched above his heart, Frank is looking up at the pictures of his son plastered across his office walls. "No one wants to hear you complain. They want you to get the part they need, and they want you to fix their car.

"Every day," he adds, "your job is on the line."

Frank Edelman's own dad died when Frank

was 3 years old. He spent much of his childhood living in a trailer park, playing very few sports. To support himself, he learned to fix cars and became a certified mechanic by 19. After opening his shop in 1987, he would come home each day and drag Julian and his older brother, Jason, to the park. He would hit them ground balls, pitch to them or have them work on throwing a football until it got dark. Even when they hated it. Even when they tried to refuse. "I think my dad still needs shoulder surgery from all the batting practice he threw us," Edelman says. "He wanted to live through us a little."

Sports came naturally to Julian. "A total daredevil and a ball of energy," says his mother, Angie Edelman. "He'd go up the slide, then jump off instead of slide down. His whole life, you had to watch him closely." His Pop Warner team, coached by his father, won the youth football Super Bowl with Edelman playing tailback and linebacker. His father didn't let him lift weights, but every day they worked on agility drills. Pushups. Situps. Changing directions like a squirrel running for its life. Sometimes, when firing another endless string of passes, Edelman would pretend he was Tom Brady, a local kid starting for the Patriots who'd played high school football at Junipero Serra in San Mateo, just 9 miles from Redwood City.

Edelman was a small kid, but that was hardly reason for his dad to go easy on him. Once, during a session of batting practice when he was in eighth grade, Edelman accused his father of throwing inside once too often and warned him not to do it again. Frank, not one to back down or be mouthed off to, fired the next pitch even closer to his son. Edelman charged the mound and leaped into the air in a rage, his fists whirling, but his father was ready. He caught him in midjump and slammed him to the ground. Frank laughs as he tells the story. "Jules jumps up and tries to head-butt me. I kind of pin him down, and he's kicking and screaming, and he cuts the inside of his lip because he'd just gotten braces that day. There was blood all down the front of his jersey. People were looking at us like we were lunatics. By today's rules, they'd probably have put me in prison. It wasn't all peaches and cream."

Going into his junior year at Woodside High School, Edelman was still barely 5 feet tall and less than 100 pounds. "Kids would tease him all the time, and he was getting into fights," Frank

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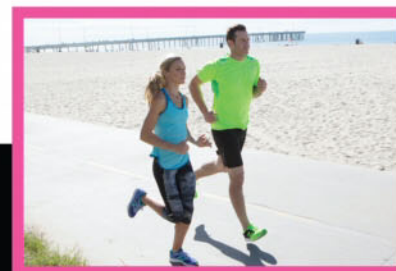
Multimedia guru Scott Van Pelt gives Coburn and fellow superstar Evan Longoria a crash course in the art of sports talk, taking them to the *SportsCenter* set as well as behind the mic on his radio show.

Coburn finds that she has a knack for pronunciation (especially when it comes to those vowel-heavy tennis players), knows a whole lot about the track and is comfortable talking about the field, and can reference old-school game shows like it's her job. Which for a brief moment, it is. She also shows off her aggressive side, as she finds it easier to comment on missed shots than made ones.

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Guy knows how to make a splash: Edelman's 197 catches the past two years ranks third in the NFL, behind Antonio Brown and Demaryius Thomas.

says. "He'd come into my room and just cry and say, 'Dad, when am I going to grow?'"

The growth spurt finally happened, and Julian grew 7 inches in less than a year. His senior year of high school, he quarterbacked Woodside to a 13-0 record.

"I thought to myself, 'OK, now it's on,'" Frank says.

IT STILL TOOK years for Edelman's ambitions to take shape. He wasn't recruited out of high school, so he spent a juco year at the College of San Mateo, then transferred to Kent State. He won the starting quarterback job right away, but it didn't exactly prepare him for a future in the NFL. Despite setting a school record for total offense, he wasn't even invited to the 2009 combine. He wondered if, after graduation, he could find work as a firefighter. "I started checking out firehouses in Cincinnati," Edelman says. "I didn't know what I was going to do. I was starting to get scared."

It was in preparing for the NFL draft that he first decided to train as if his football survival depended on it. Every day he'd wake up at 5 a.m., climb into his truck and drive 50 minutes in the

freezing cold to Cleveland, just so he could run routes and catch passes from former Browns quarterback Charlie Frye. The truck's heater didn't work, so most of the time he'd wrap himself in blankets for the drive. When he came home, he'd catch passes from a Jugs machine for an hour, trying to suppress any feeling that it might all be for naught. "I did that every day for three months," Edelman says. "I really grew up. I started to get addicted to the Jerry Rice mentality. I can get up before anyone else does. I can outwork anyone." At Kent State's lightly attended pro day, his time in the shuttle drill was faster than that of anyone else who'd attended the combine that year. The Patriots decided he was worth the late-round gamble.

He was a mess during his first training camp. During a break for Wes Welker, Edelman was thrown in with the starters, and he dropped his first pass. At another practice, he lined up on the wrong side of the formation, and Belichick snarled at him, asking if he'd even bothered to study his playbook. "I thought I was studying so hard," Edelman says. "I had flash cards I'd go over constantly, but it was like going from junior high to getting your Ph.D. in terms of complexity." He'd often stay late at the facility, sometimes just staring at his helmet, trying to soak it all up in case he got cut the next day.

He was convinced that his chances of making the team were so thin, he kept from the medical staff that his groin was in agony. He believed the team would simply give him an injury settlement and release him. "I was an idiot, but you feel like you don't have a choice," Edelman

says. It wasn't until the year was over—37 catches for 359 yards in 11 games—that he found out he'd just played through multiple sports hernias. "Julian is a tough kid," Belichick told reporters recently. "We knew that right from the beginning."

NOT SURPRISINGLY, EDELMAN spent his first few years with the team in quiet awe of Brady, hoping the quarterback might invite him to work out during the offseason when they were both back in their native California. They shared an agent and grew up near each other, so it seemed like a possibility. The first offseason, Brady called just one time.

As the years went on, the calls became a bit more frequent, even as Edelman's playing time diminished. In 2010, his second year, Edelman caught just seven balls. In 2011, the year the Patriots went 13-3 and played in the Super Bowl, he had only four catches and moonlighted as a corner to help hold on to his roster spot. Yet Edelman obsessed over what routes Brady liked best—the nuances, like where he preferred to place the ball on certain throws and the way he could convey his intentions with a presnap nod. One year, Brady called to throw while Edelman was at a family barbecue. "I ran so hard, I puked," Edelman says. "He ran me to death." But it paid off: A friendship began to emerge. "He's like a big brother," Edelman says. "He taught me everything about how to be a professional. We'd throw three times a week, then we'd go have lunch at his house, and at first it was surreal for me. Just me and Tommy, hanging out. Is this for real? But then it became just normal. I stopped being scared of him."

Edelman was still a journeyman type in the eyes of everyone else, though, including his head coach. In 2013, when Welker signed with the Broncos, Belichick brought in Danny Amendola from the Rams as his replacement. Edelman trusted, however, that the countless hours he'd invested with Brady would be his secret weapon. When Amendola had trouble staying healthy, Brady started firing darts Edelman's way. By the end of the year, he'd caught more passes (105) than he had his entire career. As a free agent following the season, he might have gotten more money elsewhere, but he re-signed with the Pats because he wanted to keep playing with Brady. "Julian and I share the same work ethic and

commitment to the team concept,” Brady says. “It’s been great watching him grow as a person, as a player and now as one of the leaders of our team.”

Watching the way Brady handled his business, both on and off the field, also pushed Edelman to think about a life outside of football. Leading up to the 2013 season, a mutual friend set up a lunch meeting with Assaf Swissa, the creative director for Superdigiital. As Edelman’s profile grew,

After combining for two big Super Bowl catches, Edelman and Malcolm Butler hit the Grammys, then the Boston duck boats.



Swissa persuaded him to star in a series of playful—and surprisingly funny—YouTube videos in which the wide receiver hosts a fake talk show, shares his favorite smoothie recipes and conducts bumbling mock interviews like he’s a slimmed-down Zach Galifianakis. “SmoothieTyme” and “BurgerTyme” soon racked up some 250,000 views each.

“It’s fun. You get to show the fans a little bit about you,” Edelman says. “It’s kind of a way to say, ‘Hey, I like *Dumb and Dumber* too.’”

Edelman’s Facebook page has grown to 621,000 followers, Instagram to 465,000 and Twitter to 392,000. A parody of the *Growing Pains* theme song, “Growing Pats,” that was posted to Edelman’s YouTube page just before the Super Bowl, has 1.6 million views to date. All of it raises his profile—and might give him more career options when the NFL is done with him.

“Videos and social posts and cool T-shirt designs, this is the new Rolex watch for athletes,” Swissa says. “This is the new cool thing you get to show off.”

And so when Edelman threw a surprise 51-yard touchdown pass in the Patriots’ AFC divisional playoff win over the Ravens, a pass that helped his team erase a 14-point deficit for the second time, Swissa knew exactly what he needed to do. He left Gillette Stadium around midnight and didn’t get back to his house until nearly 1 a.m., but he immediately sat down in front of his computer and started designing a T-shirt with a silhouette of Edelman throwing the touchdown to Amendola. He finished the design around 4 a.m., sent it off to production and got the shirt up for sale on Edelman’s website by 10 a.m. Within hours, Swissa says, Patriots fans were flooding the site with orders for the \$29.99 shirt.

Back on the field, Edelman had been so focused all these years on surviving in the NFL, he’d forgotten how good it felt to uncork a touchdown pass. As he walked to the sideline, high-fiving Brady, Amendola and the rest of his teammates, he was briefly transported in his mind to the park near his parents’ house in Redwood City, throwing footballs with his dad.

Weeks later at the Super Bowl, with under three minutes to play, Edelman ran a perfect route, shook free from Seahawks defensive back Tharold Simon and caught a touchdown from Brady to give the Patriots a 28-24 lead. But



PRESENTS

The Pats drafted Julian Edelman in 2009 with a traded pick. So which teams should make moves this year? Insider Mark Dominik plays matchmaker.

Cleveland trades No. 12 and No. 19 overall picks to Washington for No. 5 overall pick to draft QB Marcus Mariota.

If the Titans pass on Mariota at No. 2, the Browns shouldn’t let their bad experience with Johnny Manziel in 2014 hold them back from picking Mariota. Just ask Seattle, which kept taking shots at the QB position before finally finding Russell Wilson. Meanwhile, the additional first-rounder gives new Washington GM Scot McCloughan a few opportunities to really improve his defense.

Kansas City trades No. 18 overall pick plus its second-rounder to St. Louis for No. 10 overall pick to draft WR DeVante Parker.

The Chiefs need another weapon to complement WR Jeremy Maclin. They might have to jump Minnesota at No. 11 to get Parker, who played college ball with QB Teddy Bridgewater. The Rams’ biggest need is O-line, and No. 18 is a better spot to find that than No. 10—and St. Louis gets a second-rounder for its trouble.

Arizona trades No. 24 overall pick and its fourth-rounder to Cincinnati for No. 21 pick to draft RB Todd Gurley.

A power run game paired with Arizona’s vertical threats make for an explosive offense—and Gurley is the draft’s best back when healthy. The Bengals get a fourth-rounder, and since they know Arizona will take Gurley, Cincy has to sweat only two picks before getting back on the clock.

there was no time for reflection. When Brady came over to praise him on the sideline, Edelman growled back, “It doesn’t mean s--- unless we win.”

When New England prevailed, Edelman stood on the platform during the trophy presentation and scanned the crowd until he finally spotted his father, and the two locked eyes. I love you, Edelman messaged in sign language, a gesture they’d often used growing up. Frank signed the same words right back, and Julian began to cry.

Months later, as he pops edamame, Edelman’s nostalgic mood has passed. There will come a day, he says, when he’ll try to let the unlikelihood of his career sink in. But he’s not there yet. If he’s learned anything from Frank Edelman and Bill Belichick, it’s that every day your job is on the line. His next moment is yet to be earned. ■

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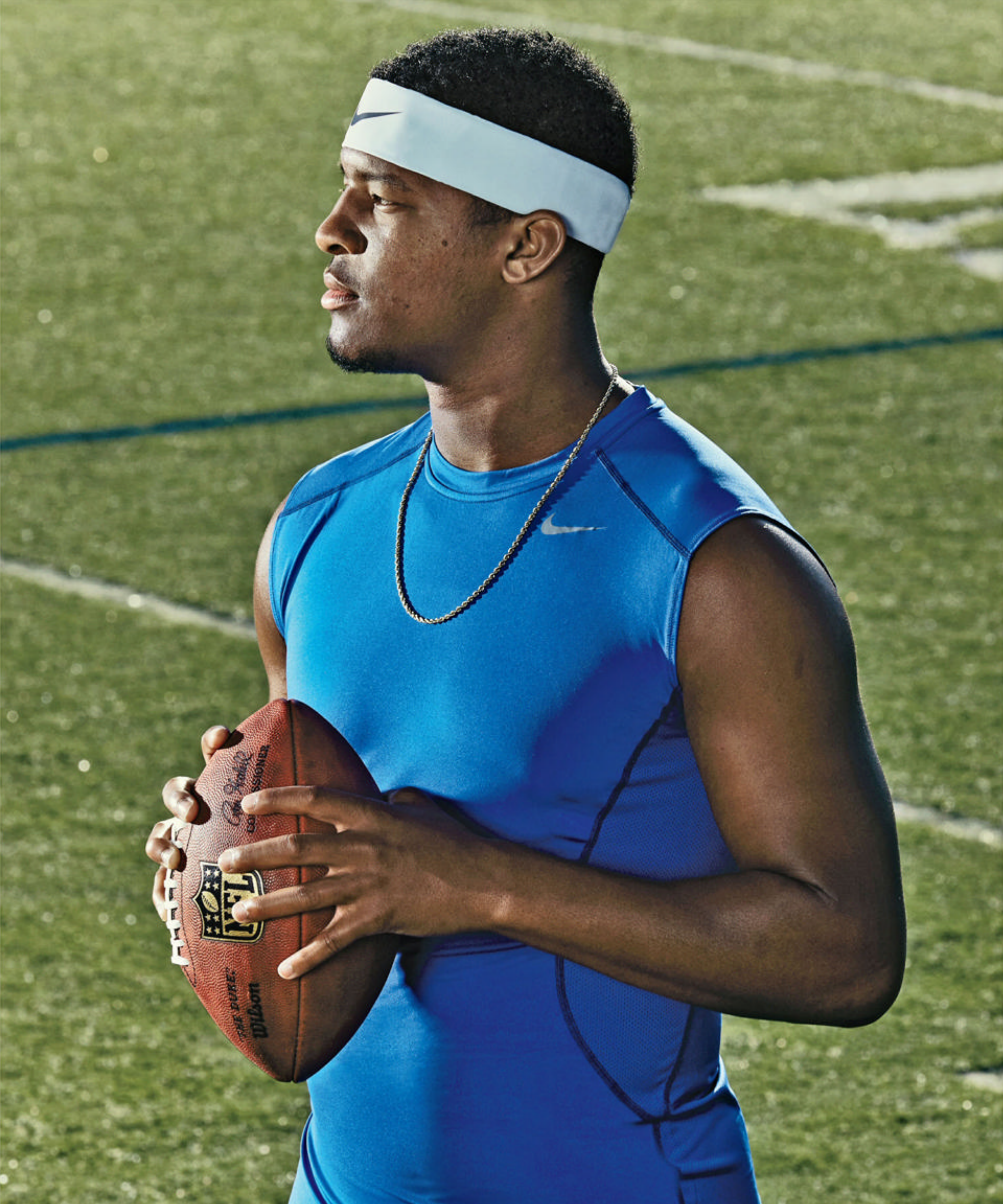
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Oregon's Marcus Mariota meets the media during his pro day.

NFL DRAFT 2015

PITY THE PREDRAFT PROGNOSTICATORS. Think it's easy being them? One part Sigmund Freud, one part Nostradamus, they must divine the futures of men often too young to sign rental car contracts. And when fate mocks their words—*"You build franchises around guys like David Carr! ... You'd be a fool to pass up JaMarcus Russell at No. 1!"*—we turn on them like a pack of wild dingoes. (Seriously, how do you think Mel Kiper's hair got like that? It's clearly in a state of shock.) Still, armed with a bevy of recorders and stopwatches, they seek answers to the unanswerable: What's the true quality of Jameis Winston's character (page 50)? How NFL-ready is Marcus Mariota (page 60)? Who's the next Johnny Unitas? The next Johnny Manziel? We will know these answers—in a few decades. In the meantime, take it easy there with the dingoes.





HEIGHT
6-4

WEIGHT
231

40-YARD DASH
4.97

JAMEIS WINSTON IS ON THE CLOCK

TRAINING DAYS IN SOLANA BEACH,
A THROW-OFF IN INDY AND HOME TO ALABAMA:
TWO MONTHS ON THE PREDRAFT TRAIL
WITH THIS YEAR'S MOST POLARIZING PLAYER.

BY KURT STREETER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE PUGLIESE

NEXT ONE UP

Stacked against the
past four No. 1 QBs,
Winston more than
holds his own.

■ TD/INT RATIO
■ 3RD-DOWN CONV.
■ COLLEGE QBR

Jameis Winston

2.32

50.8%

82.0

Andrew Luck

Drafted: 2012

3.73

46.0%

86.2

Cam Newton

2011

4.29

39.1%

89.3

Sam Bradford

2010

5.5

48.0%

85.3

Matthew Stafford

2009

1.55

39.9%

66.6



TALL AND 21 and broad-shouldered, the quarterback who seemingly half the world is talking about sits on a bench in the California sun and surveys the field before him.

For weeks, Jameis Winston has been training in Solana Beach with George Whitfield, a former Division II QB who has helped a succession of first-round passers sharpen their skills ahead of the NFL draft. Winston lives with one of Whitfield's assistants in a four-bedroom house with an ocean view.

His day began not long after sunrise, on the beach, with throwing and running drills orchestrated by Whitfield in cool ocean water that lapped at his waist. Here at the football field at Santa Fe Christian high school, there was more passing, the focus on technique and touch, including a dozen throws launched 25 yards over the head of an

intern, who held a metal tennis racket as high as he could. Each spiral left Winston's crooked-fingered right hand, arced gently over the top of the racket and descended into the arms of a receiver. Winston did it blindfolded.

"From an early age, I realized I had a confidence that others my age just didn't have," he says afterward on the bench. He shifts the ice packs on his knees. A gnat buzzes by.

When asked if he recognized his skill early too, he simply nods. The gnat swirls past. He swipes at it, catches it, and laughs.

"You see how fast my hands are?"

With his light, brash tone and rounded Southern accent, he can sound like a young Ali. He has the same showman's touch: an ability, through the force of personality, to cast a spell, mesmerizing and perhaps something

to be wary of as well.

He tells a story about playing T-ball in grade school. By far the team's best player, he'd leave his infield position and chase down the ball wherever it was hit—even if he had to snatch it from the glove of a surprised teammate.

"My dad had to tell me, 'You can't do that,'" Winston says. "I couldn't do just whatever I wanted."

WHAT DO WE make of this prodigy nicknamed Jaboo (pronounced Jay-Boo), a sobriquet from his mother?

How do we square the man with the kid, reconcile his mature talent with the things he has done—immature and entitled at least, inexcusable at worst?

How do we reconcile the youngster so driven that by sixth grade he was filling notebooks with complex offensive plays, so academically accomplished that he was accepted to Stanford, with the Florida State quarterback he became, cited for shoplifting crab legs, punished for jumping onto a campus table and shouting the crude Internet meme "F--- her right in the p----!" and—most seriously—accused of, though not charged with, raping a female student.

Nearly every detail of the rape allegation has been made public. Winston said he met a fellow student at a bar, took her to his apartment and had consensual sex. His accuser, Erica Kinsman, said that she was sexually assaulted on Dec. 7, 2012.

Kinsman has since transferred and is pursuing a federal lawsuit against FSU, claiming an inadequate investigation violated her civil rights. Her legal team did not make her available for this story, but she spoke in *The Hunting Ground*, a recently released documentary about sexual assaults on campuses. Late last year she also testified at a student conduct hearing at FSU. "[He] raped me," she said. "I'll say it as long as I live



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because that is what happened.”

Winston was never charged, nor was he expelled; a widely criticized Tallahassee police investigation resulted in insufficient evidence. In an interview with *The Mag*, Willie Meggs, the Florida state attorney who investigated the case, declined to speculate on what happened in that apartment. “It was not a good night for anybody,” he said.

As the April 30 draft approaches, Winston’s every move is under a microscope. Even his tentative decision to skip Chicago and stay home with family in Alabama for the big day created a questioning buzz: Was he told to steer clear by a commissioner reeling from a year’s worth of headlines about domestic violence? Along with a 26–1 record at FSU, his Heisman and his impressive predraft workouts, skepticism about Winston’s character will also be part of the backdrop when his name is called.

Yet the league seems poised to move on. The consensus remains that the Buccaneers will, and should, draft him with the top pick. “When somebody would bring him up, I used to think, ‘I just can’t see how I would like this guy,’” says a high-ranking official with an NFL team. “But we have done a lot of work, and the more work we do, the more I like him.” Adds an AFC scout: “Nobody’s saying, ‘I can’t believe the Bucs would consider taking him No. 1.’”

GIVEN THE WAY crab legs have become attached to his name, it comes as no

surprise that Jameis Winston’s love of seafood verges on obsession. To wit, the heap of shrimp and crawfish stacked on a plate before him at a California Pizza Kitchen in Solana Beach.

It’s mid-February, and at the moment, his life centers on the combine.

“I’m prepared for anything they throw at me,” he says. “I’m going to be able to tell the truth, you know?”

The swagger from another day’s workout has followed him to the dinner table. He sits and begins rehashing his thorny past. He tries to put his troubles into two categories. There are the college high jinks and thoughtless idiocies: what he said standing on the student union table, for example. He cops to this right away.

“I was with my friends,” he says. “I was quoting—it was a meme. Like it’s just something people say, and me being, wanting the attention, I burst it out. I got a bunch of laughs. You know, that’s childish, but I did it. I’m going to own that. That was stupid.”

Then he poses a question: “So what other off-the-field issues am I having?”

Winston pushes at a prawn. He had been hungry. Not anymore.

“So many people try to dehumanize me,” he says. “They say, ‘Off-field issues.’ They say, ‘The sexual allegation stuff.’ People view me as a convict, and I didn’t even do nothing. People say, ‘How does he play like this and all this stuff going on?’ Like by me playing well during that adversity, that made people think about me

worse, thinking I’m a sociopath.”

Winston leans forward, closer. He is utterly believable. Then you recall that this is the same kid who before his Heisman-winning season told a room of reporters: “If I get [Johnny] Manziel disease ... get your mics and start slapping me on the head.”

“I think I know him, but I think there’s a part of everyone that no one knows,” says FSU coach Jimbo Fisher, who during the height of tension over the rape accusation remained a steadfast defender. “But I’m gonna say this: I trust him. He has an ability with people to put them at ease.”

Winston continues. Of the allegation he says, “It hurts the women that I respect”—his mother and grandmother and his girlfriend, a college basketball player at Rice, who is his high school sweetheart and remains by his side.

He pauses, sticks out his chin, hoping to brush past his vulnerability.

“I’m not ...” he says.

A beat passes.

“You know what I’m saying?”

CLAD IN BLACK-AND-BLUE gear inside a gym near San Diego, Winston shouts: “I’m the receiver, I’m the receiver! Gonna make you look good too!”

It’s Feb. 11, a week before the combine, where he will be prodded and poked by doctors, grilled by coaches, trotted out in his underwear to be weighed and measured, and participate in a series of drills—tests, really.

But on this late morning, I’m



Through the pressure in Hueytown to the rape allegation in Tallahassee, Winston has leaned on his parents for guidance.



throwing the passes. Whitfield has given me pointers and put me through warm-ups. I haven't thrown a football in 20 years. Winston waits downfield.

A slant pattern: My throw wobbles. He snatches it.

A simple 15-yard out: I put a little extra on this one, and it's high. He one-hands it, grinning.

There is no sign of the alternately imploring and hesitant kid from the California Pizza Kitchen. This is the Winston who leads title-clinching drives.

Bryce Petty shows up. Some say the ex-Baylor QB will be the third passer taken. He and Winston trade fart jokes. Winston ribs him about being slow. "I thought I was gonna be in trouble until

I saw Bryce run," he says. "I got nothing to worry about."

Then comes Marcus Mariota, the former Oregon QB who won the 2014 Heisman and led the Ducks to a resounding win over FSU in a Jan. 1 semifinal. Pundits have long cast Mariota as the anti-Winston. The lanky Hawaiian is said to be calm and quiet and reliably boring, but that—along with his talent—might give him an edge over Winston.

The two trade nods. They don't talk much. They are like proud alpha-male lions pacing around the same pack.

Later, at the combine in Indianapolis, a scrum 1,000-strong settles under the cantilevered edge of Lucas Oil Stadium. Much of the talk is about the rape allegation and crab legs and whether Winston can be trusted. A photo has spread across the Internet showing him with a considerable gut. Is he overweight? Is he taking his NFL future seriously?

The photo was taken at the start of his training in Solana Beach, before he'd gotten focused and energized and hired a cook to improve his diet. When he wasn't on the field or in the gym, he listened to motivational speakers, NFL players and current and former coaches invited by Whitfield. "Don't be a taker, be a giver!" one longtime offensive coordinator intoned. "You come to work every morning, you bring an 'I give a s---' attitude. ... Bring something to the table every goddamn day."

Winston wrote down the coach's words in a red binder.

On his first evening in Indy, he strides with his slow, stiff-legged strut through a maze of coaches and players at the Omni Hotel. It's been a good day. He weighed in at 231 pounds—15 lighter than at the start of Whitfield's drills. But around noon the next day, reports circulate that doctors have

found something wrong: *Breaking Story—Jameis Winston Experiencing Weakness in Throwing Shoulder*, reads a headline scrolling across TV monitors.

He emerges from a long corridor inside Lucas Oil Stadium, steps through a thicket of cameras and marches to the podium. "First off, before we start anything," he says to dozens of reporters, coaches and players, "I want to let you all know I made mistakes, and I know I have a past, but right now it's about me moving forward and earning the trust of all these 32 teams out there."

With reporters pining for an opportunity to grill Winston about his misdeeds, he smiles, leans in and infuses his words with country charm, as if he's disconnected from the gravity of the moment. He claims the shoulder is fine, that all these years it just hasn't had much rest with his playing football and baseball nonstop. He promises that he will throw the next day. "A lot of people thought I was fat, but I'm here," he says. "I look good and I know it."

Afterward, he conducts a short radio interview. Once drafted, he is asked, what kind of attitude will he bring to

Top QB prospect Marcus Mariota loves his Cold Cut Combo with American cheese, tomatoes, Ranch and Sweet Onion sauce.

PUTS UP YARDAGE BY THE FOOTLONG.

SUBWAY

MARCUS MARIOTA
 POSITION: QUARTERBACK
 HEIGHT: 6' 4"
 WEIGHT: 222 LBS.
 HOMETOWN: HONOLULU, HI

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his new team? “I’m not going to be a taker,” he says. “I’m going to give them everything I got!”

The answer is either a canned copy of the coach’s advice from the red notebook or it’s the considered view of a studious kid open to anything he believes will make him better.

At 9 p.m., out of nowhere, Winston, Petty and Whitfield appear in the Omni lobby and summon an Uber cab. They want one more drill, one last rehearsal, before the next day’s passing test. They navigate dark and winding roads to Cathedral High School, a brown-brick campus on the outskirts of Indy. A custodian opens the gym.

Winston and Petty toss footballs across a glossy basketball court. Problem is, there are no receivers. Soon enough, the doors open and in walks the Cathedral boys hoops team, fresh off a tough loss in overtime. The bus ride back to school had been solemn, coach Andy Fagan says, but the loss quickly becomes an afterthought. The players run go-routes and fades. One ball nearly impales itself in the chest of a gangly brown-haired kid. Another kid gushes proudly that a pass felt like it had broken his hand.

At the end, Winston hams for photos. Then he and Petty stand side by side. In sequence, they launch footballs into high orbits, aiming roughly 25 yards across the court at a basket. Petty says he’ll be the first to make it.

“This is what I do,” Winston says. “Every time somebody talking that stuff to me, what happens?”

It’s on.

He is in his element: surrounded by fawning kids and a loyal coach, losing

▶▶
26

WIN SOME, LOSE ONE

Winston’s 26 straight W’s to start his career is the most of any FBS QB since 2000. The lone loss? His final game against Mariota.

himself in the one thing he loves above all else—a win. In this moment, with the sudden doubts about his million-dollar arm, he seems even more dialed in.

Petty launches a spiral. It clanks off the rim.

“Ohhh!” comes a chorus from the teenagers.

Winston bites his lip, wheels back, turns his hips and unlimbers his shoulder. Another clank. They keep on, ball after ball.

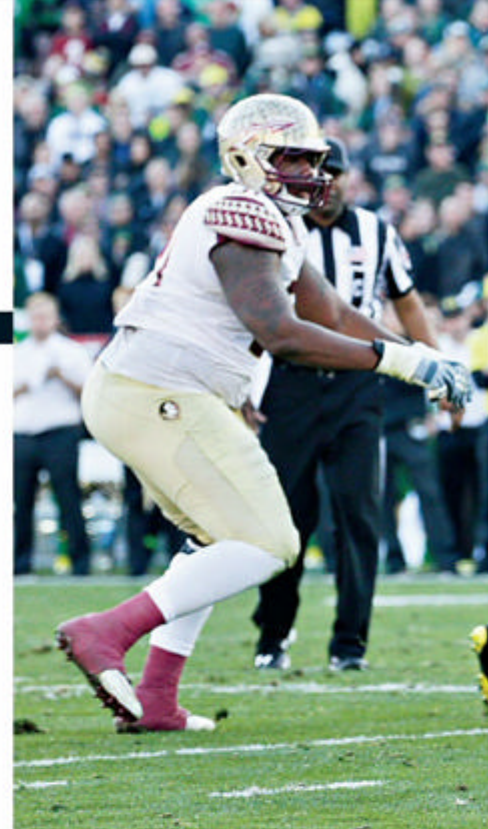
“Hey, Jameis!” a player says. “You gonna get close?”

His jaw tightens. He throws again. So does Petty. Finally, Winston lofts one with just enough speed and distance and arc. Swish. His face shifts from deadly serious to seriously relaxed. “Like I said, that’s just what I do.”

On the way home, there is a reminder that the win over Petty doesn’t silence the voices outside. Cathedral’s principal gushed in a tweet that his students joined Winston for the impromptu workout. Riding in a van that is trailing the QB, one of Whitfield’s interns checks his phone. A Twitter follower has sent the principal a sharp reply: *I didn’t know cathedral let illiterate rapists on the premises.*

THE UNOBTUSIVE HOME where Jameis Winston was raised sits on a tree-shaded lot on the working-class border between mostly black Bessemer and mostly white Hueytown.

During a weekend visit after the combine, Winston walks



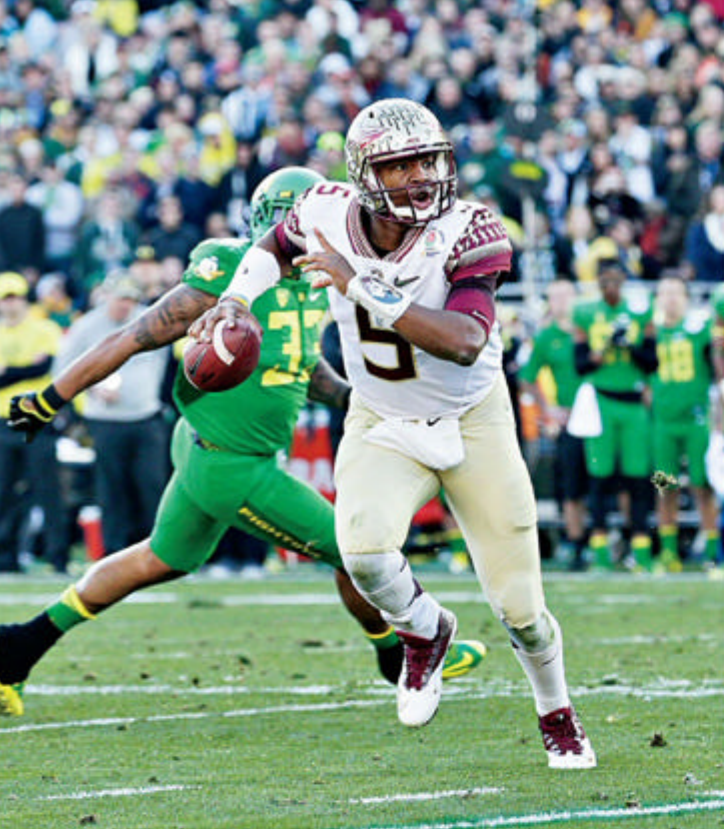
from room to room, the walls festooned with awards and newspaper clippings chronicling his exploits at almost every age. The living room, like the house, like this smokestacked Alabama community, is small enough already, but Winston and his achievements seem to dwarf it—especially the trophies, many of which are on the wooden floor, off to the side, jammed together near a window. It is hard not to wonder what growing up inside a trophy case does to one’s sense of self. He seems appreciative of the hardware while oddly unsentimental about it, as if he has never considered not being the very best.

Trailing Jameis is his brother, 7-year-old Jonah. Sitting quietly on a brown sofa in the living room is his mother, Loretta, 43, who works in the claims processing department at a local Social Security office. Standing nearby are Otis Leverette, a deep-voiced, Gandhi-quoting, Nietzsche-reading former NFL lineman who trains and mentors Winston, and a camera crew shooting an ESPN documentary.

Jameis’ father, Antonor Winston, 43, known around town as Ant, is there too. He works for Bessemer fixing street signs and traffic signals, and is a local legend, celebrated for his incandescent personality, his coaching of the peewee

TO SEE MORE OF WINSTON, TUNE IN TO ESPN’S **DRAFT ACADEMY** ON APRIL 21, APRIL 28 AND MAY 5 AT 7 P.M. ET





Bessemer Tigers—and, of course, for being Jaboo's daddy. The locals say Ant pushed his son hard, but he would step back and let Jameis make his own decisions, and mistakes, as well.

"I'm a full-grown man and I'm always cutting up," he says, eyes sharp, smile wide. "They say he needs to grow up. But he just turned 21. In a lot of ways, I need to mature too. Even when he's 40, he's going to be still just like me."

With his parents watching, Winston continues the tour. Near the front door, stuck behind a coffee table and a couch, are two of the most coveted awards that can be bestowed upon a college football player: the bronze Walter Camp Award for the nation's best player and the Davey O'Brien trophy, given to the nation's best quarterback. "It spins!" Winston says, rotating it. "It spins around! I love that award."

He walks into the kitchen, where next to a dinner table the family keeps Ice, a spotted pit bull mix, in a kennel. Winston points at the white refrigerator, then above it, to a brown shelf partially hidden by half-inflated red-and-blue balloons that have been bobbing since his birthday the month before.

There sits Jameis Winston's Heisman Trophy.

"Don't want everything to be, just, seen so easy," he says.

THE NEXT DAY, Winston tours the hangouts of his youth, mostly avoiding Hueytown. His parents' home is in Hueytown, but he does not say that's where he is from. He was the nation's top-rated quarterback there, was among the country's best baseball players and was an honor student. But his connection to this hillside municipality (population 16,000) is strained.

Last fall a local news story was headlined: *Jameis Winston has 'embarrassed' Hueytown, residents say*. Last summer, for Winston's appreciation day, the concrete stands at Hueytown were half full.

"We all have a perception about the No. 1 QB in the nation,

about the level of warmth that should be there for him," says Jeff Sentell, a prep sports reporter for *The Birmingham News* who covered Winston. "But that just wasn't there for Jameis. When he left, he didn't have a favorite-son type appreciation."

The explanation could be rooted in tangled history: Winston doesn't want to talk about racism—he shifts uncomfortably in his seat when the subject is raised. He was a bold, confident black kid leading a high school team in a mostly white Southern town. He also snubbed the only schools that matter where he's from, Alabama and Auburn.

But it is hard to find critics these days. Searching for answers, I stop at local restaurants, call rival coaches, the junior high principal, the woman who runs Hueytown High. Nobody talks. Not to an outsider. Not here, where gossiping about what's not your business is as sacrilegious as having a wedding on Iron Bowl Saturday.

"A lot of people were jealous of him," says Matt Scott, Winston's high school coach, who is white. Like his former quarterback, he steers clear when the topic comes to race. "It was an older crowd too. People who are more of the mindset of a whole lot less flash."

Scott describes fiery arguments with his young QB, similar to the battles with Fisher at FSU. "He was one of the only people that had the same mentality I did about winning," says Scott. "But some people saw the way he was, and it just rubbed them the wrong way."

With his mother along for the hometown tour, Winston decides to stop at La-Z-Boy to buy a recliner for his Grandma Myrtle. There is hardly a soul in the place, and he revels in the anonymity. For a long time, the only people who speak to him are an elderly couple. "Jameis, we're Auburn fans, but we want to wish you good luck." He

thanks them, then leans back in a chair. It looks as if he could fall asleep.

His mother checks the price tag: about \$2,000. "That's a lot," she says. All of her life and all of his, \$2,000 would have been hard to swallow.

"Mama," he says, "I'm not worried about the price. Let's just get it."

Soon he is driving through the beating heart of Bessemer, the dusty, low-slung northern neighborhood where his mother was raised and his extended family still lives, where Winston spent much of his childhood. Once home to steel mills and iron smelts and Bo Jackson, Bessemer is now a faded place with a patina hue. The mills and smelts have dwindled. Bo is gone. Jameis remains.

He comes home to get away from the twin weights of accusation and expectation. But some say his troubles also stem from here. "In high school they allowed him to do whatever he wanted," said a local resident quoted in the news story.

When Winston needed a sanctuary from the tension, he came to Grandma Patricia's house, where he often slept as a boy, alongside at least a dozen cousins. Over a mound of sticky chicken wings at the dining room table, he tells his family that he wants to be in Bessemer during the draft. "Life is going to change a lot," he says. "I want to be around y'all that day."

From the front porch, Winston looks out over the big yard full of brown grass and pecan trees, where he and other kids used an empty Gatorade bottle for a football.

His black-and-silver Nikes crunch against gravel as he and cousin Tay Tay walk down the block to a ramshackle corner store called the 12th Ave. Supermarket.

"That Jaboo? That Jaboo?" says a man. "Jaboo, my dog, what up?" Word



spreads. Two old friends show up. Then five. Then a gaggle of onlookers. Winston takes time for everyone. “I’m not going to act like I’m better than anybody from my hometown,” he says, “or better than anybody at the 12th Ave. Supermarket on the corner.”

He will likely be a Week 1 starter for an NFL team. He will possess riches. But he will also be trying to outrun the shadows of Tallahassee. “One thing I had to learn,” he says, “I can’t treat every place like it’s Bessemer, Alabama.”

ON SUNDAY MORNING before Winston leaves Alabama, the crowd at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church revels in worship. Deacons sing spirituals, and ladies in the front row shout “Hallelujah!”

Then the congregation quiets and Bobby Chapman, one of Winston’s uncles, stands at the pulpit. Jameis and his family walk slowly to the front.

This had been Winston’s first church, but fame and infamy have had their way with his schedule. He hasn’t been here in a long time. In black slacks, a white shirt with faint stripes and a black tie, he stands before the worshipers, washed in applause. He grips the mic and scans the crowd. He pauses.

“I just thank y’all for y’all’s prayers, and, uh, I’m going to keep representin’”

“Amen!” the people shout.

“The sky is the limit right now, and I knew, uh, I made mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes.”

“Amen!”

“I always kept my spirit. That all started from the great teachings of everybody here. Y’all been my family, so thank you so much. And, uh, y’all keep watching me on TV. I am going to be on there for a long time.”

Winston flashes a smile and waves. It is a small, almost delicate wave, like the wave of a child.

“ONE THING I HAD TO LEARN: I CAN’T TREAT EVERY PLACE LIKE IT’S BESSEMER, ALABAMA.”

JAMEIS WINSTON

ON MARCH 5, a few days after his visit to Bessemer, Winston flew to New York for a six-hour face-to-face with commissioner Roger Goodell and Troy Vincent, one of his deputies. The meeting, which Winston had requested, was meant to be a forum to explain himself.

“It was a great opportunity to be around, so they could get to know me,” he says after returning to San Diego. “When you talk to me, it’s different. But from the outside, you’re just like, ‘This kid is a prick. This kid is arrogant. He thinks he can get away with anything.’”

Walking along crowded 10th Avenue in downtown San Diego, Winston’s presence far outweighs that of Petty, Whitfield and his interns. The group strolls through the neighborhood surrounding Petco Park. Winston stops in a restaurant to talk to a family. He lifts their toddler and coos at their baby. In the middle of a crosswalk, he starts dancing to a thumping hip-hop beat. He spots a pretty blonde, probably in her early 40s, and as if about to propose, he drops to one knee, looking directly into her eyes. She smiles, gives a twirl of her BMW key chain and says, “May I help you?”

He laughs. She laughs. Winston bounds off.

Given who he is and the scrutiny that will surely surround him as a “face of the franchise,” when every move he makes will be inspected—whether in Tampa or Nashville or some other city—this kid has to change.

Or maybe not.

Maybe, for the NFL and its fans, redemption is less about

change and more about championships. Maybe people will move beyond his past and focus on his dazzling abilities. They might even embrace his goofy, strut-your-stuff charisma. Or maybe that very confidence will lead to another pitfall.

At dinner, Winston plows through a row of sushi and repeats his sincere need to alter perceptions—by doing community work, being a good teammate and winning multiple Super Bowls.

He says that part of his problem is that he hates being seen as “different than anybody else.” It bothers him that everywhere he goes, on every sidewalk, in every room and even on every football field, there are whispers.

“What can I do?” he says. “I can’t go and blame the world. I’m saying to myself, ‘Hey, you are ready now. Ready to move forward. You’ve grown up.’ ... I just got to keep being me.”

ON THE LAST day of March, inside a gleaming indoor practice field at Florida State, Jameis Winston dances and gabs and holds court before unleashing more than 100 throws. Those in attendance say it is the most passes they’ve seen from a high-profile QB at pro day in recent memory. Almost every one is on target.

An army of NFL coaches is watching, listening and taking notes on everything from Winston’s black leather cap to the way he thanks his teammates to the rhythm and accuracy of his spirals. After one of them, he stops dead and seems to smile straight at a soon-to-be rival defensive coordinator.

Lovie Smith, Ken Whisenhunt and all the other assembled coaches watch intently, saying little. They must decide what they’re looking at. They must figure out what Winston means when he says: I just got to keep being me. ■



NAUTICA

MARCUS MARIOTA

HEIGHT

6-4

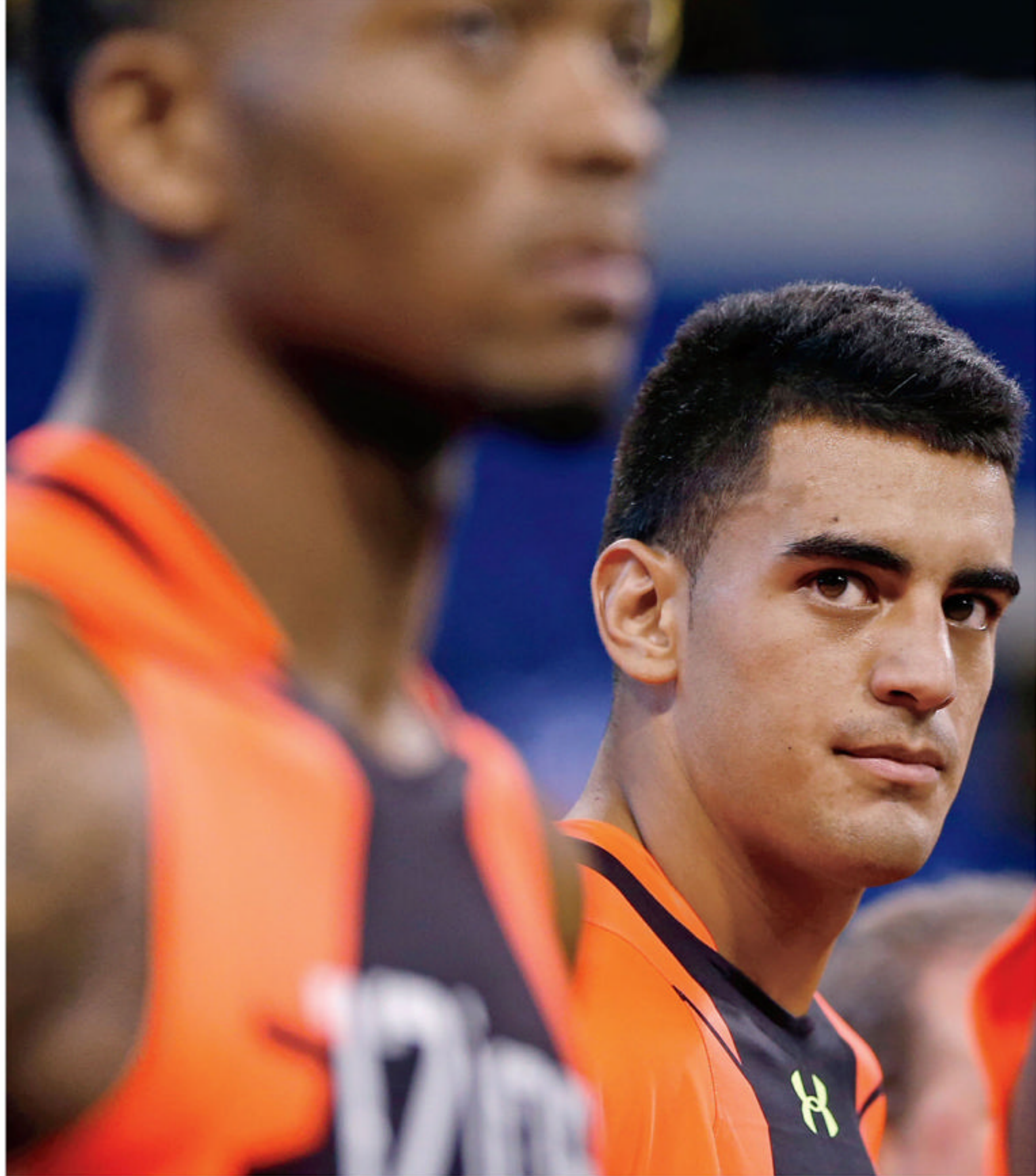
WEIGHT

222

40-YARD DASH

4.52

Mariota won the 2014 Heisman, but Jameis Winston (far right) sits atop most big boards.

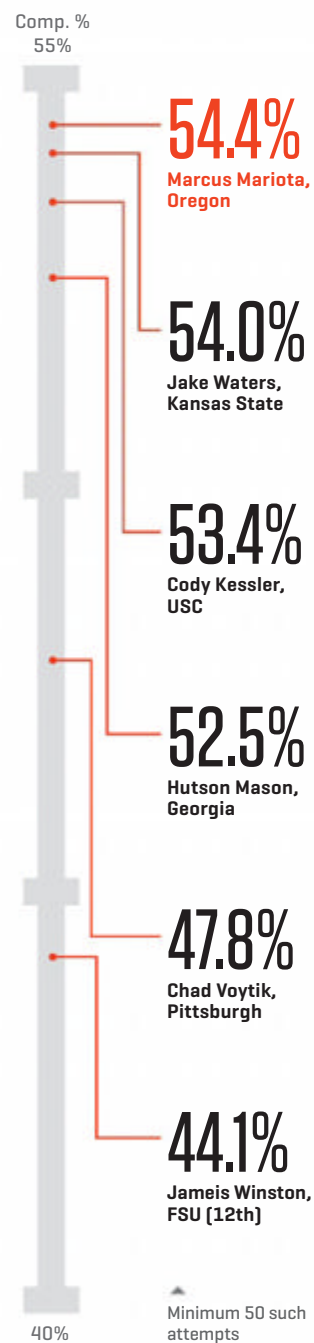


BEATING THE SYST



LETTING IT FLY

Think Mariota dinked and dunked his way to the Heisman? Think again. His 62 completions on throws of 15 or more yards downfield was the most among Power 5 QBs, and he was ultra accurate on such passes.



EM

THE NFL DOESN'T QUITE KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF **MARCUS MARIOTA**. BUT THE FILM DOESN'T LIE: THE KID TRANSCENDS OREGON'S HIGH-FLYING OFFENSE.

BY MIKE SANDO

Warning: Story contains strong jargon and explicit X's and O's.



Mariota accounted for 136 TDs from 2012 to '14, five more than the second-best FBS QB.

THE FIRST THING you notice about Marcus Mariota is that he *looks* like the prototypical NFL quarterback, only better. He stands tall (6-foot-4) and stable (222 pounds), like Brady and Eli. He runs fluidly (4.52 40), like Russell and Kaepernick. He throws quickly and over the top, like Rodgers, with more than adequate velocity to win in the NFL.

So why, according to draft analysts, is Oregon's Heisman winner polling a distant second to Florida State's Jameis Winston as the No. 1 pick? You won't find the answer in the stats. Winston threw four more interceptions in 13 games last season than Mariota did in his 41-game career. Since 2012, Mariota has won 36 starts—including a 59-20 Rose Bowl rout of Winston's Seminoles. That's seven more W's than any other college starter in that span. You won't find it in background checks either. Mariota's file, by all accounts, is stain-free, just what you'd hope for from the face of your franchise.

So what's the problem? Oregon's offense didn't consistently ask Mariota to command a huddle, decipher complex defenses or throw in tight windows. The perception is also that the Ducks' fast pace and simplistic route tree rarely forced Mariota to make the NFL-level

reads that became second nature to Winston in Florida State's pro set. But to view Mariota through such a basic lens would be a mistake, according to ESPN analyst Jon Gruden. "People don't always realize Oregon runs a lot of NFL concepts," he says. For example, Mariota has made full-field reads before picking a side to attack, à la NFL QBs. He's used progression passing concepts to great effect, finding third and fourth receivers with ease. Mariota went so far as to say his favorite throw was the seam route against three-deep coverage—a ball he'll be asked to complete with regularity in the pros. As he said at the combine, "You have to put enough touch on it to get it over the linebacker and enough zip to [beat] the safety."

Meanwhile, the pro game is evolving

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NFL DRAFT

toward Mariota's skill set. Since 2008, NFL shotgun use has nearly doubled, and teams now use three-plus wide receivers on close to half of first downs, up from 31 percent. While no NFL offense matches Oregon's playcall speed, 12 teams averaged less than 38 seconds between plays last season, compared with seven teams per season from 2010 to 2013.

None of this assures Mariota's NFL success, of course. But when we dived deep into Mariota's game tape from a home win over No. 7 Michigan State last September, it showed that the QB might enter the NFL on stronger footing than the mythology surrounding the Ducks' offense might suggest. Take a look for yourself at how he executed two staples of Oregon's offense, Z Spot Bengal and Bubble Y Over.

Z SPOT BENGAL

It's third and five from the Oregon 25; this is the Ducks' sixth play of the game after the first five netted five yards and a punt. Lined up in the gun, Mariota is on the verge of Oregon career records for total offense and passing touchdowns. But that's the last thing on his mind; Mariota doesn't want to put his team on tilt in a 0-0 game. The playcall is familiar to anyone in the NFL, even if coaches don't agree on terminology. Call it Z Spot Bengal or Spot Dragon or whatever, but just know Mariota needs to make a full-field read before picking a side and getting the ball out on time.

As Mariota surveys the defense pre-snap, a short motion to the right side tells him to read zone coverage. The defensive alignment, with the corner playing inside leverage, suggests



Z SPOT BENGAL

Oregon vs. Michigan St.

9-yard completion on third and 5



BUBBLE Y OVER

Oregon vs. Michigan St.

17-yard completion on third and 10

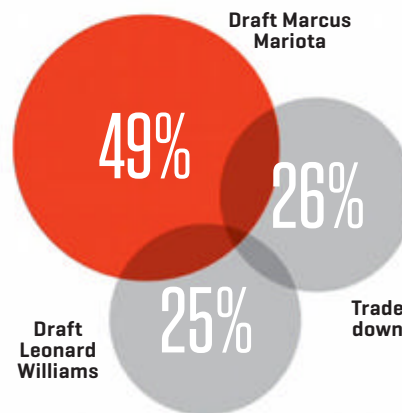
an inside slant on the weak side [1] might not be there, but Mariota must still systematically read the play inside to out. No guesses. He passes the test, throwing a dart for a nine-yard gain to weakside slot Keanon Lowe, who it turns out was plenty open.

This isn't graduate-level stuff, but the concepts carry over to the NFL. Then, like every quarterback transitioning to the pro level, Mariota will find out right away how much tougher it is to hit even open receivers. Defenses will take away the slant side with an inside linebacker and nickelback. A well-coached linebacker can go straight past the tight end [2] to the Z receiver on the spot route [3], with the strong safety taking the halfback in the flat. Just like that, nobody is open. And playing fast won't

SPORTSNATION

WHAT SHOULD THE TITANS DO WITH THE NO. 2 PICK, ASSUMING WINSTON IS OFF THE BOARD?

6,580 votes as of April 6



Hey sports fans! Looking for an answer? Ask me your burning sports questions using **#PULSEOFTHENATION** on SportsNation's Instagram handle. Your question could appear in the May 11 issue of *ESPN The Magazine* with my answer. See you then!

- MICHELLE BEADLE



Started my Camry.
Wanted tacos for lunch.
Crossed down into Baja.
Joined a soccer game.
Lost my passport to a seagull.
Hitched a ride on a cargo ship.
Got boarded by pirates.
Freed some livestock.
Retook the ship.
They were really good tacos.

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Let's
Go
Places

have nearly the effect on the pro level, where defenses are more comfortable adjusting on the fly.

"Most college defenses sit in a two-high shell with safeties in stress, afraid to move," says one NFL defensive assistant. "TCU had one of the country's best defenses last year, and they left those poor kids in a shell the whole time. In the NFL you might get eight different defenses with five different looks in the first 10 plays, not three with one look like they do in college."

BUBBLE Y OVER

It's third and 10 from the Oregon 41. Six minutes remain in the third quarter and the Ducks are wilting in the setting sun. Their previous five drives have totaled four yards on 14 plays, allowing the Spartans to build a 27-18 lead. The playcall—Bubble Y Over, a progression passing play with a zone-read [4] fake and traditional NFL route concepts—surprises no one who has closely watched Mariota's 27 previous starts.

"This was one of the signature plays of your career," Gruden tells Mariota at Gruden's QB camp months later.

Only one problem: "They have the right blitz called," Gruden says. Bringing six defenders, Michigan State gets heat on Mariota quickly, which means Bubble Y Over is now a scramble drill. Unfazed, Mariota escapes the grasp of two Spartans and finds running back Royce Freeman [5], normally his fourth read, with a lunging shovel pass for a 17-yard gain. The book says Mariota should have thrown to his hot receiver on the bubble [6], but as he explains to Gruden, taking that route would have given the Ducks zero shot at a critical first down. Mariota goes on to complete two more passes during the drive, including a 24-yard strike to Devon Allen for the

first of four unanswered touchdowns in the 46-27 win.

Two NFL quarterbacks, who were given anonymity so they could speak frankly about their playbooks, say all teams have variations of Bubble Y Over. When Peyton Manning was in Indy, "Florida" signaled the Colts' version of the play; Miami, New Orleans, Philadelphia and Manning's Broncos all call it often. "A ton of teams run it with play-action and a bootleg/naked away," one of the QBs says. "Oregon ran it out of the gun and with the zone read. It's the same thing a different way."

When the blitz didn't force him to improvise, Mariota showed he could consistently read through his progression, going deep or dropping a perfect pass over a linebacker and under a safety. These are the types of pro-style reads NFL evaluators want to see.

In the pros, Mariota will need to ready himself for defenses that use never-ending wrinkles and disguises, which complicate even the most simplistic progression read. If you've ever wondered why a rookie QB often looks like a high schooler sitting in on a Ph.D.-level course, well, here's why: *Is the D in a one-high or two-high contour? If two-high, stay strongside on the sail route. If it's cloud coverage or cover 2, go to the X. But against two-man, go with the sail. Oh, and if it's 3 Buzz, the field safety drops inside to nickel, and the Will defends the flat. And if it's third and long, the buzz safety plays the sticks, which looks like quarters coverage but might be disguising a coverage rotation to the strong side.*

As one offensive assistant says, "It's a real bitch."

Yes, life on the field as an NFL quarterback moves fast. Fortunately, speed has never been Marcus Mariota's problem. ■

THREE MONTHS IN A PROSPECT'S SHOES

Marcus Peters isn't hiding from the questions. Washington coach Chris Petersen dismissed the All-Pac-12 corner last November after run-ins with assistants. Now Peters says he is out to prove he is still first-round-worthy. We caught up with him to see just how hectic his predraft life has been.

—STACEY PRESSMAN

12 PRIVATE WORKOUTS

"My play speaks for itself. If you pick me, I know you'll get the best corner in the draft, for sure. It still hasn't hit me yet that I could be a first-rounder. I don't think it will hit me until the draft."

11 STATES VISITED

"I'm from Oakland, so before this I had really only been to California, Florida—for a trip in my senior year of high school—and Washington. It's fun. I get to meet a whole lot of new people, see a lot of different places and eat some good meals."

22 FORMAL INTERVIEWS

"I'm definitely doing more travel than most [prospects]. I have to go speak to all these teams and talk about everything that happened. I just have to be 100 percent myself, 100 percent genuine and show everyone full respect. I get my point across."

They say running backs are on the wrong side of history.

They say he should have went to the pros last year.

They say he wasn't a complete back.

They say he needed to improve as a receiver.

They say his pass-blocking was a weakness.

What they failed to say, is how he will defy the doubt.

Melvin Gordon
Running Back

#DefytheDoubt



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DRAFT

MOCK THIS WAY

Truth be told, projecting the NFL draft is a peculiar job. And yet come draft day, we always need to know what Mel Kiper Jr. and Todd McShay, the crazy guys who do it 365 days a year, can tell us. [So who, really, are the peculiar ones?] This year they agree on two elite QBs at the top. But after that? Dissension. Watch on April 30 to find out who wins bragging rights.

 MEL KIPER JR. ESPN's NFL draft expert

 TODD McSHAY Director of college scouting for Scouts Inc.

1

BUCS

JAMEIS WINSTON

QB, FLORIDA STATE
Nothing has changed. Winston is big [6-4, 231], strong-armed and durable with elite anticipation and processing skills. He's the most NFL-ready QB in the draft.

JAMEIS WINSTON

QB, FLORIDA STATE
If there's even a decision, it's off the field. Because on it, Mel is right: In skills that translate to the pros, Winston is one of the top QB prospects of the past 10 years.

2

TITANS

MARCUS MARIOTA

QB, OREGON
My sense is Mariota goes here. He has done everything he can to prove he isn't just a "system" guy, and you can't question his physical profile or work ethic.

MARCUS MARIOTA

QB, OREGON
Mariota would be a major upgrade over Zach Mettenberger. He has elite athleticism and intangibles, but he needs to improve his footwork to win at the NFL level.

3

JAGUARS

LEONARD WILLIAMS

DE, USC
The Jags will be thrilled if Williams falls to No. 3. He offers immediate versatility, excelling in defending both the pass and rush. Easy call for coach Gus Bradley.

AMARI COOPER

WR, ALABAMA
QB Blake Bortles needs weapons, though, and the 6-1 Cooper is a true No. 1 receiver. He is a tremendously savvy route runner with great separation skills.

4

RAIDERS

AMARI COOPER

WR, ALABAMA
As Todd says, Cooper is supremely gifted as a route runner. He sets up corners and then uses his 4.42 speed to sprint past them. He's a building-block type of player.

LEONARD WILLIAMS

DE, USC
Williams [6-5, 302] is the best defensive player in this draft. Sure, QB Derek Carr needs targets, but Williams is just too good to pass up. He impacts the D right away.

5

REDSKINS

DANTE FOWLER JR.

DE, FLORIDA
Fowler's combine [4.6 40 at 261 pounds] sealed his top-10 status. His sack totals aren't eye-popping [8½ in 2014], but we've seen flashes that show star potential.

DANTE FOWLER JR.

DE, FLORIDA
The Redskins need a pass rusher, and Fowler is the best of the bunch. He sets a good edge against the run and can also slip back in 3-4 coverage schemes.

6

JETS

BRANDON SCHERFF

OT, IOWA
Given the QBs on the roster, the Jets *need* a good rushing attack. Scherff [6-5, 319] can play either guard spot or RT and would improve this O-line from the start.

RANDY GREGORY

OLB, NEBRASKA
Gregory's positive drug test won't affect his stock much. A terror off the edge, he'd be set loose as an OLB in the Jets' 3-4 scheme to get after the QB, which is his strength.

7

BEARS

KEVIN WHITE

WR, WEST VIRGINIA
With the Bears trying to fill the void left by Brandon Marshall, White is a good get here. He has elite deep speed [4.35 40] and prototypical WR size [6-3, 215].

KEVIN WHITE

WR, WEST VIRGINIA
It's White here for me too. Having just one really good season at WVU concerns some, but he's a big-play threat and comes down with impossibly contested balls.

8

FALCONS

VIC BEASLEY

OLB, CLEMSON
Atlanta needs production from its pass rush, and Beasley had 44.5 TFL in his last two years at Clemson. He's not an every-down guy, but he'll contribute early.

SHANE RAY

OLB, MISSOURI
Agree about Atlanta. Disagree with the pick. While both Beasley and Ray have explosive first-step quickness, Ray is longer and has a relentless motor. He's a better fit.

9

GIANTS

SHANE RAY

OLB, MISSOURI
Here's where Ray goes. Pass rush is a sneaky need for the Giants. They've still got Jason Pierre-Paul, but the team has little depth behind him. Ray solves that issue.

BRANDON SCHERFF

OT, IOWA
NY's biggest need? O-line. Scherff is incredibly tough and could replace Justin Pugh at RT or play LG. Either way, he'll help Eli stay upright for the first time in years.

10

RAMS

BRESHAD PERRIMAN

WR, UCF
No player has risen faster than Perriman, who ran two sub-4.3 40s on his pro day. The Rams need a potent weapon outside, and few fit that bill better than this guy.

DEVANTE PARKER

WR, LOUISVILLE
O-line is the Rams' biggest need, but the value isn't right at No. 10. Another need is WR: Kenny Britt and Brian Quick aren't long-term answers. But Parker might be.



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It's time to look beyond the bowl at [YouTube.com/Wendys](https://www.youtube.com/Wendys).



RB Todd Gurley and
CB Trae Waynes
top their positions.



ESPN'S FRONT OFFICE DEBATE ... WHAT TO DO AT NO. 3?

GENERAL MANAGER MARK DOMINIK:

To me, this pick comes down to two guys: Leonard Williams, the best overall defensive prospect, and Dante Fowler Jr., who could fill our most critical defensive position, the "Leo" edge rusher. I lean toward Fowler. He's a 15-sack guy.

DIRECTOR OF ANALYTICS

AARON SCHATZ: If he's a 15-sack guy, why didn't he do that in college? In the tests that correlate strongly

to NFL success—vertical, broad jump and the three-cone drill—he did poorly. I'd go Williams.

DIRECTOR OF SCOUTING

TODD MCSHAY: I understand what you're thinking, Mark. Fowler surely fits the "Leo" mold: I like the fit. I just don't like the value at No. 3. I'd have a tough time passing on Williams.

**PERSONNEL
DIRECTOR
LOUIS RIDDICK:** Williams concerns

me. As an interior lineman, he might not impact third downs the way you'd expect for an edge rusher or a No. 3 pick.

DOMINIK:

That's a great point. With all the different views here, it seems our best option is to trade down. But if we don't get an offer we like, I'm still leaning toward Fowler. If he plays to his potential, he gives us exactly what we need on D. And we play Andrew Luck twice a year, so that's important.

11

VIKINGS

TRAЕ WAYNES

CB, MICHIGAN STATE
The NFC North's Rodgers, Stafford, Cutler. Six games a year. A good cover corner isn't just nice to have; it's a necessity. Waynes' skills translate to early success.

LA'EL COLLINS

OT, LSU
With the uncertainty surrounding Adrian Peterson, Collins adds versatility to the line. He needs to improve in pass protection, but he's got elite straight-line burst.

12

BROWNS

DEVANTE PARKER

WR, LOUISVILLE
Dwayne Bowe is a No. 1 wideout in name only. Parker beats defenders on high-ball catches with his size [6-3, 209] and huge catch radius. He'll make any QB look better.

DANNY SHELTON

DT, WASHINGTON
Outside of QB (and, well, WR and RT), nose tackle is the biggest hole to fill. Shelton is ninth on my board—great value for a dominant double-team magnet.

13

SAINTS

RANDY GREGORY

OLB, NEBRASKA
With two firsts, a bet on Gregory is good value. He offers length and great athleticism, and he should be better against the run than his lean frame might indicate.

VIC BEASLEY

OLB, CLEMSON
The Saints' biggest needs are OL and OLB. I don't see much power on Beasley's tape, but there's no denying his LB-best 35 bench reps or his explosive first step.

14

DOLPHINS

DANNY SHELTON

DT, WASHINGTON
Yes, Miami just acquired Ndamukong Suh, but Shelton's a complement. He's not as disruptive as Suh, but he clogs lanes at the nose position, allowing single-teams elsewhere.

BRESHAD PERRIMAN

WR, UCF
Here's the fastest riser in the draft. His improving ball skills and ridiculous speed [4.27 40] easily fill the void Mike Wallace left. A major weapon for Ryan Tannehill.

15

49ERS

ARIK ARMSTEAD

DE, OREGON
Justin Smith and Ray McDonald are gone, and Darnell Dockett is 33. So while Armstead is raw, he fills an immediate need while also offering high value for the future.

TRAЕ WAYNES

CB, MICHIGAN STATE
With Chris Culliver and Perrish Cox gone, Waynes could start right away—elite straight-line speed [4.31 40] and he is at his best in press-man or cover 2.

16

TEXANS

BUD DUPREE

OLB, KENTUCKY
The drop-off after J.J. Watt is larger than Houston would care to admit. And while Dupree isn't a pass-rush mechanic, he's a high-upside athlete who can set the edge.

DORIAL GREEN-BECKHAM

WR, MISSOURI
Losing Andre Johnson hurt, but based on talent alone, DGB is a top-three WR in this class. He has an absurd combination of size [6-5, 237] and speed [4.49 40].

17

CHARGERS

MALCOM BROWN

DT, TEXAS
Brown [6-2, 319] isn't by any stretch a complete product yet. But what he is, is a two-gap run stopper, which San Diego desperately needs up front.

TODD GURLEY

RB, GEORGIA
The Chargers need an RB more, and Gurley, even with the health issues, is one of the most talented players in this class. Unique blend of power and breakaway speed.

18

CHIEFS

JAELÉN STRONG

WR, ARIZONA STATE
Even with Jeremy Maclin in the fold, KC needs a wideout upgrade. Strong is 6-2 with a 42-inch vertical, so we might actually see Alex Smith make downfield throws.

CAMERON ERVING

C, FLORIDA STATE
I think you're undervaluing Maclin. Smith needs protection, and Erving, at 6-5, 313, could step in to replace C Rodney Hudson, who went to Oakland in the offseason.

19

BROWNS

TODD GURLEY

RB, GEORGIA
Scary combo: Cleveland's O-line is elite, and Gurley is the best RB prospect this year. Plus, with the Browns' other backs, he'd have time to get back to 100 percent.

ERECK FLOWERS

OT, MIAMI
The Browns' O-line is good, yes, but it'd be even better with Flowers' massive frame [6-6, 329] anchoring the RT position opposite Pro Bowler Joe Thomas.

20

EAGLES

LONDON COLLINS

S, ALABAMA
The Eagles' secondary? Rough. Collins is adequate in coverage, but he's at his best near the line, where his instincts in run D and tackling ability fit seamlessly.

LONDON COLLINS

S, ALABAMA
Agreed. Philly has other needs, but like Mel says, Collins is solid in coverage and would be a force in stuffing the rush. This is a weakside LB in a safety's body.



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+ FOR MORE DRAFT ANALYSIS FROM MEL AND TODD, VISIT ESPN.COM/INSIDER



From near right, DE Arik Armstead, WR Jaelen Strong and OLB Eli Harold.

21

BENGALS

DEVIN FUNCHESS

WR, MICHIGAN
Funchess [6-4, 232] creates major matchup problems, especially in short-passing spots, an area in which the Bengals, and Andy Dalton, have difficulty.

ANDRUS PEAT

OT, STANFORD
Though he struggles against power rushes, Peat has all the tools to be a good starting LT. It's insurance too. Current LT Andrew Whitworth is a free agent after the season.

22

STEELERS

KEVIN JOHNSON

CB, WAKE FOREST
He won't be a star in 2015, but Johnson injects youth into an aging D. He's as fluid as any corner in this class. He makes man-to-man coverage look easy.

ARIK ARMSTEAD

DE, OREGON
I've heard concerns about Armstead's motor, but at 6-7 he's got excellent length and violent hands. He's a terrific value—I've got him No. 7 on my board.

23

LIONS

LA'EL COLLINS

OT, LSU
Acquiring Haloti Ngata eases the sting of losing Suh, so upgrading an average O-line is key. As one of the best run blockers in years, Collins can play tackle or guard.

MALCOM BROWN

DT, TEXAS
Detroit lost Suh and Nick Fairley. Ngata's not enough. Brown is very solid against the rush and is an improving pass rusher. He can play multiple positions up front.

24

CARDINALS

MELVIN GORDON

RB, WISCONSIN
There's always a value question in taking an RB this high, but Gordon is a true game breaker. The Cardinals have few glaring holes, and he amps up an already good offense.

BUD DUPREE

OLB, KENTUCKY
Gordon is an option, but Dupree is the better fit. The Cards want to add speed, and Dupree ran a 4.56 40 with a 1.60 split. He's 6-4, 269. That's off-the-page explosion.

25

PANTHERS

D.J. HUMPHRIES

OT, FLORIDA
Protecting Cam Newton is priority No. 1. And Humphries faced, and handled, some of the top pass-rush attacks in the SEC. This pick fills a massive need.

T.J. CLEMMINGS

OT, PITTSBURGH
Yes, O-line is definitely a weak spot. Clemmings could play RT from day one. He's raw and can be a liability in pass protection, but he has long arms and good power.

26

RAVENS

MARCUS PETERS

CB, WASHINGTON
Peters [6-0, 197] has some character questions, but in terms of talent, this is a steal. He's the type of ball hawk who turns bad throws into points.

JAELEN STRONG

WR, ARIZONA STATE
Losing Torrey Smith hurt. Strong isn't the burner Smith is, but he's a big target opposite Steve Smith. A 4.44 40 and the ability to create separation don't hurt either.

27

COWBOYS

BYRON JONES

CB, UCONN
The Cowboys are clearly built to win now, and the secondary is their biggest concern. Jones, who can slide to safety, is the best athlete in this draft. Star potential.

EDDIE GOLDMAN

DT, FLORIDA STATE
Defensive line is a hole too. Signing Greg Hardy will help them get to the QB, but Goldman is stout against the run. Dallas can grab an RB on Day 2.

28

BRONCOS

CAMERON ERVING

C, FLORIDA STATE
The Broncos have the QB and the weapons. But to remain in the Super Bowl conversation, shoring up the interior of the O-line is key. Can't do better than Erving at 28.

D.J. HUMPHRIES

OT, FLORIDA
Humphries projects as an LT, but he fits anywhere in Gary Kubiak's zone-blocking scheme. Denver struggles in pass protection, which is Humphries' strength.

29

COLTS

ANDRUS PEAT

OT, STANFORD
Andrew Luck is good enough to succeed with any O-line, but Peat offers big-time upside as a starting LT or elsewhere on the line. He's got top-10 talent.

ELI HAROLD

OLB, VIRGINIA
I'd like to go OLB, but there aren't any worth taking. Harold needs to improve his recognition and tackling, but he can learn from Trent Cole and Robert Mathis.

30

PACKERS

JALEN COLLINS

CB, LSU
Collins is a high-upside play here. He can press, play off and shows awareness in zone schemes. And in the NFC North, you simply can't have enough corners.

MARCUS PETERS

CB, WASHINGTON
The Pack lost both Tramon Williams and Davon House. Based purely on tape—and not the off-the-field issues—Peters is the best CB in this class. Worthy risk.

31

SAINTS

NELSON AGHOLOR

WR, USC
Depth for Drew Brees is never bad. Agholor [6-0, 198] is a gifted route runner who can create space underneath and beat defenses over the top.

KEVIN JOHNSON

CB, WAKE FOREST
Yes, the Saints signed CB Brandon Browner to help an awful pass D, but adding another one won't hurt. Johnson is fluid in his backpedal and can play nickel right away.

32

PATRIOTS

EDDIE GOLDMAN

DT, FLORIDA STATE
The Pats lost Darrelle Revis and Brandon Browner. Jones has elite tools [an absurd 44.5-inch vertical]. His anticipation needs work, but he takes well to coaching.

BYRON JONES

CB, UCONN
The Pats lost Darrelle Revis and Brandon Browner. Jones has elite tools [an absurd 44.5-inch vertical]. His anticipation needs work, but he takes well to coaching.

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Our class of 2015 (from left): Alabama's Blake Sims, UCLA's Brett Hundley and Colorado State's Garrett Grayson.



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UCLA

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"RUSSELL WILSON
WAS IN THE
SAME SITUATION.
HE JUST WANTED
AN OPPORTUNITY."
BLAKE SIMS
Alabama

FAN'S GUIDE TO A CLEAN START

FOOTBALL DRAFT 2015

1. Ensure lucky football is on lucky shelf with laces facing out before draft begins.
2. Craft social media post declaring your team's need for a top quarterback. All other options are a misuse of a first round pick.
3. Delete previous social media post. Craft new post announcing that you're totally cool with the linebacker your team selected with their first round pick.
4. Go online and purchase jersey of newly drafted player.
5. Start coming up with potential fantasy team names involving newly drafted player.
6. Cancel online jersey purchase when newly drafted player is traded 15 minutes later. Go back to fantasy team name drawing board.
7. Research and learn about irrelevant late round picks to help achieve football know-it-all status at work.
8. a. Purchase NIVEA Men Sensitive Protective Lotion to care for, moisturize and protect skin in anticipation of upcoming season's frigid tailgates.
b. Use NIVEA Men Sensitive Shaving products for a smooth shave from preseason through regular season ... until playoff beard becomes necessary.



CLEAN START



BLAKE SIMS

MEL KIPER'S PREDICTION ► 7TH ROUND

"I'm team first and Blake Sims last." That attitude had Nick Saban gushing after Alabama won the SEC title, saying, "I've never had a guy work so hard." After carrying a clipboard for four seasons, the fifth-year senior threw for 28 TDs, completed 64.5 percent of his passes, ran for 350 yards and set a school record with 3,487 passing yards. But does one season provide enough of a sample? Despite Sims' speed (4.57 in the 40) and an ability to extend plays with his feet, teams question his ability to work through reads—*three picks in the Sugar Bowl!*—and his height. In response, Sims references another 5-foot-11 signal-caller. "Russell Wilson was in the same situation," Sims says. "He wasn't as highly regarded as other QBs in his class—he just wanted an opportunity." If Sims has proved anything, it's that he'll make the most of his.

BRETT HUNDLEY

MEL KIPER'S PREDICTION ► 3RD ROUND

"People may not be looking at me as hard as they should be," Hundley says. A dual threat at UCLA, he began his Bruins career with a 72-yard run to pay dirt and ended it three seasons later as the program's career leader with 75 TD passes. Hundley's résumé isn't the issue: 106 total touchdowns, the first UCLA quarterback with three seasons of nine-plus wins, 3-0 vs. USC! And at 6-foot-3, 226 pounds, he's built to handle pro punishment. Problem is, his 125 career sacks indicates he hangs on to the ball too long. "Our offense is based off zone reads," he explains. "So if I run the ball and get tackled in the backfield, it goes down as a sack. Watch the film. Nothing adds up to 125. I'm confident in my ability. Accuracy. Arm strength. I feel like I can do all that better than anyone ... period. You don't work this hard to say you're second or third."

GARRETT GRAYSON

MEL KIPER'S PREDICTION ► 2ND ROUND

Scouts have always valued Grayson's reps in Colorado State's pro-style attack and his ability to stretch the field. The Mountain West Offensive Player of the Year threw for first downs on 40 percent of his attempts and gained 9.5 yards per pass attempt in 2014. But some of those same scouts voice concern about his minus-46 rushing yards. And they discount Grayson's gaudy passing numbers and his 19 wins as a starter because they came against second-tier competition. "A lot of the doubt heaped on me comes because I didn't play against the 'big boys,'" says Grayson. "But I think I'm right there with them, I really do." And after dispelling any concerns about his athleticism at his pro day with a 4.72 40, 34-inch vertical and 10-foot-1 broad jump, Grayson will find a lot of the "big boys" looking up to him after April 30.



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[SHELTER FROM THE STORM] Behold the power of the MLB union, which offers protection to players like Josh Hamilton that NFL vets can only dream of.

[T] here are many layers to unpack with Josh Hamilton and his employer, the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. First there is his drug relapse, allegedly into cocaine use; there also reportedly have been two alcohol-related relapses in the past six years. There is the refreshing defense by the media of his private life and a disturbing racial double standard that accompanied it. (Josh Gordon was afforded no such defense.) Then there is the curious response by the Angels, who were apparently upset that their own player *didn't* get suspended by MLB.

The MLB players association has been called the most powerful union on earth, and Hamilton's case illustrated its muscle. According to a report in the New York *Daily News*, Hamilton's lawyer and union officials convinced an independent arbitrator that the outfielder was not subject to discipline because other than one slipup, which he self-reported, he had followed his treatment program. The arbitration process, fought for by the union as part of the Joint Drug Agreement, also protected Hamilton's \$83 million in remaining salary, much of which the Angels wanted to recoup through a suspension, explaining in part why the team turned on its own player.

Where the MLBPA's power resonated most, however, was in an unlikely place: the NFL. In the old days, which is to say as late as six months ago, a football player in Hamilton's case would have been disciplined by Roger Goodell without much chance of appeal, unless having an appeal heard by a Goodell designee sounds like justice. But these days, as Gordon and Wes Welker can attest, Goodell can no longer unilaterally impose sanctions on players without a third-party arbitration process, an important victory for the NFL players association. NFL players are still miles from their baseball counterparts, but consider this: In 2009, zero percent of disciplinary cases were subject to neutral arbitration. That meant the commissioner was judge, jury and executioner on all issues, on and off the field. That number has risen to 97 percent, the NFLPA says. And in the cases of Gordon and Welker, that new process resulted in reduced suspensions for their drug violations.

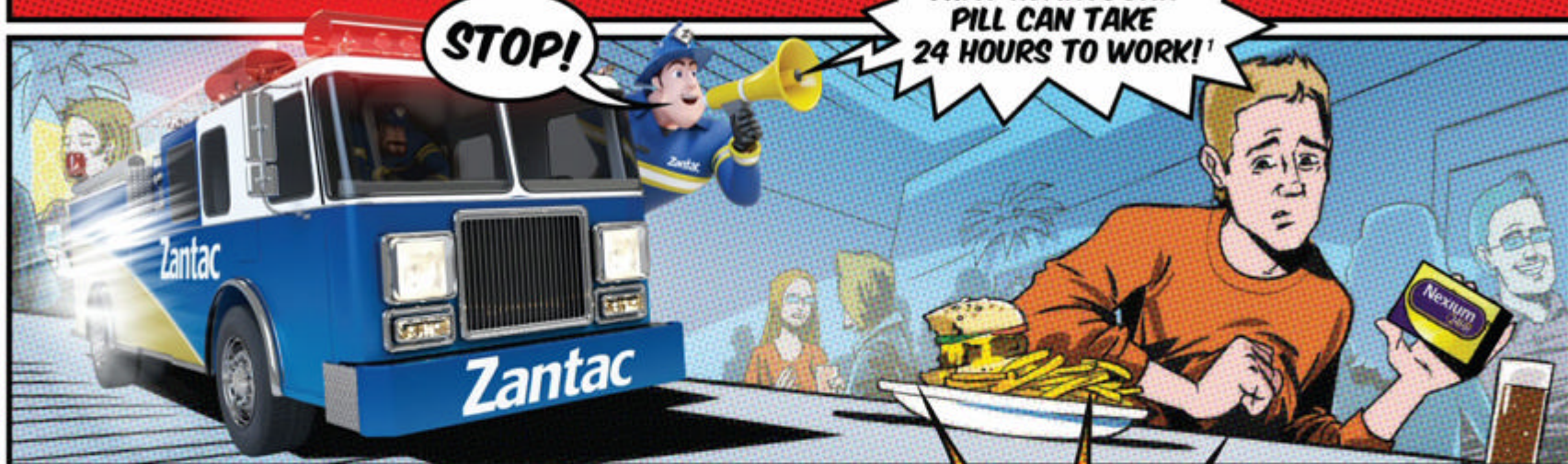
But while these gains could serve as a unifying moment toward the ultimate goal of reducing the commissioner's absolute power, the NFL union and its retired players are instead fighting a civil war over money. Last month NFLPA executive director DeMaurice Smith successfully withstood a hostile takeover, defeating the eight candidates who sought to replace him. The failed coup revealed the fractures inside the union that have weakened it: There's no player who serves as the public face of union solidarity and power, the role Joe Torre, Robin Roberts, Mark Belanger, Dave Winfield, Tom Glavine and David Cone have played in baseball since 1966. Outside of Drew Brees and Aaron Rodgers, the most visible, richest, most glamorous players—the quarterbacks—are also the least active when it comes to fighting for player rights.

The greatest of them all, Joe Montana, will forever be linked with crossing the picket line during the 1987 NFL strike. Nearly 20 percent of the players joined him that year. This might seem like ancient history to you, but the consequences of failing to stick together are still being felt. Goodell's power is weakening, but the commissioner can still keep his players in limbo, lording over them through his ability to create a holding pattern in the discipline process. He still has not suspended Greg Hardy over his domestic violence case, and he has not yet released Adrian Peterson from the exempt list even though he claimed he would after the completion of the running back's legal process on child abuse charges.

Goodell's days of handing out yearlong drug suspensions like candy are over, but the players will still be subject to arbitrary justice as long as the commissioner can wield that personal conduct hammer. To take it away, the union will have to exorcise the ghosts of the 1987 strike; instead of infighting, maybe all the players need to topple Goodell is a little more solidarity, a little more belief. Look no further than baseball for the benefits of solidarity and belief: Commissioner Rob Manfred cannot discipline Hamilton. The Angels cannot take his money. The process is clear and equitable—because it was negotiated from a position of strength.

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